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Thesis
A Novel

by

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I

A road from east to west and a road from north to south join at Keton and form a cross. Part of the north-south arm of the cross is Keton's main street, called North Street instead of Main; and the east-west arm is, for the most part, residential. On a little knoll in the northwest angle of the cross sits the white wood congregational church, its wide front door, when open on a Sunday morning, looking to North Street strollers like the mouth of the great white whale.

More than one good minister had stood in the doorway of the congregational church long and often and looked into the heart of Keton. The most often used introduction to an anecdote within a sermon was the words, "Recently as I stood in the door of the church I saw -- "

If the good pastor were standing there now, at one o'clock in the afternoon on an April day, he would have seen Mr. Will Ashley, the letter carrier and a faithful member of his flock, step out of the postoffice with his heavy bag of letters strapped over his shoulder. Mr. Ashley, walking slowly and fingering a packet of letters which he carried in his hand, turned right and crossing the railroad bridge disappeared into Abramson's Dry Goods Shop, the first store on the north end of town and his first port of call.

A little later the mail truck, carrying packages and special delivery letters, clattered out of the driveway beside

the postoffice, and turning to the left away from town, chugged up the little hill in front of the church, and turning to the right, made its way at a reckless speed down the eastern arm of Keton's cross. Had our good pastor been standing in his doorway, he probably would have received a hearty greeting from Tiger O'Toole, the driver of the truck, who had been a prize-fighter in his youth some twenty years earlier, and who at forty-odd still retained a rather youthful outlook on life. The minister wouldn't have known, of course, even if he had been there, that at that moment Tiger was at a turning point in his life. Something was to happen to Tiger on that day that would dog him to the very end of his life and which overnight would cause him to show his years.

Will Ashley emerged from Abramson's two or three letters lighter. He stopped momentarily outside the store to look back to the postoffice on the other side of the railroad bridge which he had just crossed. Once he had forgotten a packet of letters and left them lying on the sorting table; returning to the postoffice after finishing his route, he had found them there and had to retrace his steps. Had he looked back at that time he might have seen Fil Overstreet, the postal clerk, waving to him in the window. Ever since then Mr. Ashley had looked back to the postoffice after coming out of Abramson's store. Then he looked down the railroad tracks as far as he could listening for the whistle of the two o'clock freight, which, on a very clear day, he could hear as it rounded the bend this side of Rutland, thirty miles away. When the train arrived at two, he

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would have finished with this side of the business section and have crossed the bridge over the river that divided the village in half.

Mr. Ashley was a short, broad-shouldered man of about forty, with large, ungainly hands and a small, delicately shaped, thin face. His face wore that look of remoteness common to letter carriers, who seem to concentrate quietly but determinedly, on the cargo they are carrying and whose usual greeting is an abstracted nod and an impersonal good-day. Will's concentration, after twenty years on the same route, had become a matter of habit now, a part of his character, rather than a necessity of his job. Today he was even more intensely absorbed than ever, not on his duties as a mail-man but on the unrest in his own mind. He blamed this unrest on the fact that this morning he had failed to have his usual bowel movement after breakfast, and consequently at about noon he began to notice a sharp ache in his head just above the right temple. This was a signal that when he got home at four-thirty this afternoon he would have to take an enema, a ritual which he hated, and then go to bed for a short nap before supper. Meanwhile he would have to suffer, for aspirin did him no good whatsoever. Hence, his face, usually smooth and goodlooking, was somewhat drawn and pale, and there was a discontented furrow between his eyebrows.

Not having heard the whistle of the freight, Mr. Ashley concluded that the day was not as fine as he had thought, and he turned to his duties with a new reason for discontent and

with a still deeper furrow between his eyebrows. After all, good weather and good health are not to be taken lightly in the life of a mail-man. To confirm his apprehensions he looked down the alley between Abramson's and the Five-cents-to-a-dollar store and saw that the Adirondacks, forty miles to the west, were hazy in spite of the high afternoon sun. But in the east, much nearer the Green Mountains stood out clear and bright, with the green hint of spring creeping up now almost to their rounded tops. That haze in the west meant rain.

The painful right side of Will Ashley's head almost cracked from the strain of changing the focus of his eyes. He handed two letters and a circular to Sid Levenson, proprietor of the Five-cents-to-a-dollar store, and turned away without answering the jovial Jew's greeting. A passing car tooted a horn at him. A circular for Parks' drug store, and a letter for Papa Parks, who was at home in bed crippled up with rheumatism. He tucked the letter back into his bag and opening the screen door of the drug store tossed the circular onto the counter. From force of habit he started to cross the street to the Episcopal church and then remembered that the new minister, Dr. Hugh Vonders, had asked to have his mail delivered at his home on Chestnut Street. He turned back and entered Ayres' grocery store.

Lew Ayres' bald head was bent over a magazine lying on the counter. Lew looked up quickly with a beaming expression on his young-looking, chubby face.

"Hi, Will," he said. The magazine had miraculously disappeared.

Mr. Ashley grunted in reply. Today even Lew Ayres gave him a disagreeable impression.

"Whatcha got today?" Lew asked, looking furtively to see that his magazine was well hidden.

Will fumbled around in his bag and pulled out a packet of letters fastened with an elastic band. There were a few tightly rolled papers among the letters. He snapped off the band and shuffled through the letters. He tossed a couple onto the counter and followed them up with a rolled newspaper.

"That all?" Lew asked, disappointed. "Haven't you got my 'Home and Farm' magazine? I wrote an article for them during the winter - they paid me six dollars for it - and it oughta be in this issue."

"That's all," said Will. He had heard about the article before.

Ordinarily Will would have slipped the bag off his shoulder onto the counter and chatted awhile, but this afternoon he wasn't in the mood for chatting. He turned abruptly toward the door.

"What's the hurry?" Lew said.

Will halted and put his hand in his left coat-pocket.

He said, turning, "Forgot something. I'll stop for these on my way back."

He handed Lew a list.

"The wife says make sure it's today's bread or she'll send it back."

Lew ran his finger down the list.

"No grapefruit juice," he said. "Won't be in until tomor-

row."

"Make it pineapple." Will Ashley brushed the right side of his forehead tenderly with his right hand. He rolled his eyes experimentally and winced with pain.

Lew said, "Whatsamatter? You sick?"

"My head's killin' me. Constipated. Goes right to my head every time. Like somebody chiselin' on the right side."

"Why don't you take an aspirin? Got some right here." He turned toward the cash register. "Keep some by all the time for my asthma; it helps my throat when it gets sore."

"Don't bother," Will said, trying not to be touched by the other man's sympathy. "It don't do me no good," he explained in a weary voice. "Took four of 'em at a time once and still had a headache."

Lew clucked sympathetically. "That's bad. You ought to give yourself a good cleaning out. Feel kind of punk myself. Guess my asthma's about due. Feel my throat getting a little raw and I'm choking up a little bit in the afternoon." He cleared his throat. "Expect that in the morning; I always choke up in the morning, but when it starts in the afternoon I'm due for an attack."

"Why don't you close up and go home? Won't be nobody around on a Tuesday afternoon - wish I could."

"I was thinking of that before you came in - may do it yet. If I'm closed when you come back, I'll leave your bundle in Papa Parks'."

Will nodded and started out.

"By the way," said Lew, "heard anything about Papa Parks? Is he still in bed?"

"He was sittin' up yesterday by the window. Looked kinda peaked."

"He's getting pretty old," Lew said. "Doubt if he lasts much longer."

"See you later," Will said.

"Hey, wait a minute," Lew called. "Forgot to ask you something."

He came out from behind the counter with a mysterious air. His little blue eyes were glistening in his rosy face like little blue Christmas lights. He stopped in front of Will and looked behind him to see if anyone was near the door. He picked an orange out of a nearby crate and began tossing it from hand to hand. He looked a little embarrassed, as he always did when asking for information instead of giving it.

Will shuffled restlessly.

Lew said, almost in a whisper, "I was down to the station last night to mail a letter, after the postoffice closed, and I heard -- "

Will shifted his pack. He didn't like to make such a formality out of gossip. It reminded him of old women.

"Barney told me," Lew continued. "He told me that Eric Tobin was back in town."

Barney Schofield was the ticket agent at the Keton railroad station.

Will Ashley said, caressing his temple, "Barney oughta

know."

"Yes," said Lew. "Yes, he ought to. But I haven't put too much stock in the things he says ever since the time he started spreading it around that President Harding went through Keton and got off when the train stopped and took a little walk up the tracks.. Remember?"

"Yep."

"Turned out that Harding -- Don't be in such a hurry -- You seen any letters for the Tobin boy?"

"Nope."

"You know, they say he's been in a nuthouse for over a year. Somewhere in Maine -- up near that college he went to."

"That so?" Will could have named the probable town, having seen the postmark on occasional letters for Mrs. Tobin, but he wanted to get away. Lew was standing in front of him, rather close, and Will had to turn his head away to avoid being spit on when the other man talked. Lew's asthma made talking an effort.

"He always was a funny guy, moody and all wrapped up in himself, bashful too, and kind of afraid of hurting other people's feelings.. Wasn't surprised when I heard he'd gone off his head."

"Where'd you hear that?"

Lew answered evasively, "I don't know. Somebody told me.. He broke down in his last year of college, and they had to put him away. Lucky his mother had enough money to afford a private hospital."

"I don't believe it," Will said. "I know Tim Cadwell, and he would have told me. He's been close to the family for years."

"They wouldn't tell their gardner, would they?"

"Tim would know. They'd tell Tim, gardner or no gardner."

"His old man used to be kind of queer, too, far as I remember."

"He wasn't too queer to put by a little money."

Lew cleared his throat for a new start, and Will Ashley took the opportunity to open the screen door and slip out.

"Lew me know if you see him when you're up there," Lew called after him.

Lew Ayres tossed the orange dejectedly back into the crate. He pouted, his round, smooth, tender-skinned face looking like the face of a child who had been rebuked. The white store-apron that covered his body from chin to knee was perfectly clean, but unconsciously he brushed it assiduously with the palm of his hand, as he did after waiting on a customer. Then his face brightened and he hastened back behind the counter. He opened the magazine again, glancing cautiously at the front door, and with his tongue thrust out to caress his upper lip he gazed fondly at a picture of a naked woman, which bore the caption, "Don't look now, but I think there's a man coming." He chuckled, and turned the page eagerly.

When he reached the bridge that carried North Street over the Keton River, Mr. Ashley paused. From his position on the

left hand side of the street, the east side, he could follow the river with his eye for almost a mile. At about half of that distance the railroad crossed the river, and Mr. Ashley had stopped to watch the two-o'clock freight snake its way across the bridge. But it was late, or else he was early. He looked at his watch. Yes, that was it; it was only quarter of two. Any time he wanted to, he reflected, he could cut a good hour off the time of his route just by paying no attention to anybody, delivering his mail without stopping to talk with people in the stores. It was worse here in town, where he had to go into all the stores; up above town were mostly homes, and all he had to do was shove the mail through the slot in the door or put it into the mailbox. Half the stores were done now, and he had just finished Burton Block, a three-story brick building bordering the river, a combination apartment and business block with stores downstairs opening on North Street, offices on the second floor, and apartments on the third. He got rid of a lot of mail in Burton Block, but the stairs tired him.

He stood on the bridge, resting his pack on the broad concrete side, and still breathing heavily from his exertions in the Block. His head was ringing worse than ever, but as he rested and gazed at the water gliding beneath him, he felt a slackening of the tension. The water was higher than it had been all spring, and muddier, but it was still far from turbulent. Mr. Ashley had seen it in years gone by when with its fierce swelling roar it threatened the existence of Burton

Block on its northern bank.

As he stood there, he heard an upstairs window screech open in Burton Block, and then it slammed shut again. A moment later he heard the clatter of steps coming down the iron steps of the outside stairway on the river side of the Block, the stairway which he had just descended. He looked up and saw Eileen Comfort descending the stairs. Seeing him shift his pack back onto his shoulder, she motioned for him to wait.

Eileen was Lawyer Burton's secretary, and Lawyer Burton, who owned the Block, was one of the keenest and wealthiest men in town. Opinion was divided concerning his virtue, but his wealth commanded respect. His secretary was one of his most ardent defenders, but concerning her, too, opinion was divided. Eileen was about twenty-four, rather tall, with black hair and eyes, and a strikingly pale and beautiful face. Will Ashley, in spite of his headache and his disgruntled temper, in spite of his forty years, his loving wife and his ten-year old son, felt distinctly willing to wait for Eileen while she caught up with him at the bridge. There was a certain amount of gossip around town about Eileen, just enough to make it seem rather questionable conduct for a married man of his staid habits to be seen conversing with her for any length of time; but Mr. Ashley would have been willing to talk with Eileen for an hour if she wanted him to, in spite of the passersby who looked at the little scene with evident interest.

But the interview was short. Eileen held a letter in her hand. "I just finished this," she said hurriedly, her lovely

face expressionless but her black eyes burning with an urgent light. "Will you deliver it for me? I don't know if it's legal or not, but I put a stamp on it. Are you going that way?"

Will Ashley took the letter. It was addressed to Eric Tobin.

"Yes," he said. "I'm going to his house."

"Would you deliver it to him personally?"

"I may not see him."

"Then mail it to him when you get back to the postoffice, if you don't see him."

"Why mail it to him? Why not just leave it at his house?"

"That would look funny," she said. "No postmark or anything; somebody might get curious and read it."

He nodded. "All right. I'll give it to him or mail it."

She thanked him and turned away. He watched her as she reascended the iron steps, paused at the top to wave to him, and reentered the building. Will Ashley had never expressed himself on the subject, but he thought privately that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, bar none. Too bad she had acquired such an unsavory reputation - although Will was of the opinion that much of it was undeserved. And too bad she had such a disagreeable brother - Albert Comfort, Eileen's twin brother, grated on Mr. Ashley's nerves, with his surly, domineering disposition, his sneering, cynical attitude. Although Albert had a perfectly respectable reputation, Mr. Ashley preferred his sister.

He heard the shrill whistle of the train and turned just in time to see the engine steam and smoke across the bridge a half-mile below. He looked at his watch; the freight was right on the dot. Time now for Tiger O'Toole to come clattering through town with the delivery truck, but Mr. Ashley looked in vain for Tiger and guessed that the truck had broken down or had a flat tire.

The Tobin homestead was about a mile outside of town, and made the end of Will Ashley's route and the beginning of R.F.D. route 1. Often Will had wished that the R.F.D. route began with the Tobins so that he would not have to plod the extra half mile between the Tobins and the next to last house on his route. But today, in spite of his headache, he was not averse to covering the extra distance. He hoped that he might see the Tobin boy so that he could deliver the letter and thus do Eileen Comfort a favor - not that he expected anything in return; he was just glad to be of service to her.

He walked flat-footedly along the left hand side of the asphalt road that led out of town and on south toward New York State. On his left was a broad stretch of hay field, dead looking and still reeking with its winter dampness, ending in several clumps of trees that finally merged into a sparse woodland. Beyond the woods not visible from the road, lay Cottage Lake at the foot of Mount Moosalamoo, an unimpressive part of the Green Mountains; and still farther east the Green Mountains themselves spread out in their lack-lustre, early

spring nakedness. He was passing, on his right, the Keton cemetery, which bordered the northern portion of the Tobin land - a hayfield and an orchard - and was screened from the Tobin estate by a long line of closely grown elm trees. Farther on a high, dense evergreen hedge rose between the Tobin frontage and the road - the house, an ugly, rambling red-brick structure, being set back about a hundred yards from the road.

Will Ashley's mail bag was nearly empty, but he carried Eileen's letter in his hand. He wondered what the letter contained and why she had written to Eric. Perhaps she had known him before he went away and had been corresponding with him, but he had never seen a letter for Eileen which might have been from Eric - and he delivered all her mail to her at the Block, although she lived on the other side of town off his route. Perhaps she had just met him and was asking him to a party or something; Eric had probably been home since Saturday or Sunday. Maybe he had met her on the train; everybody knew she spent most of her week-ends in New York, and there were wild rumors of why and how. Perhaps Tobin wasn't such a nut after all.

Will turned to his right and plodded up the narrow driveway, also bordered by dense evergreen hedges, that led to the Tobin house. He had not gone ten steps before he almost bumped into someone going in the opposite direction. Mr. Ashley looked up and saw a tall, thin, broadshouldered young man standing beside him.

It was Eric Tobin, though the postman hardly recognized

him. His face was very thin and pale. His little gray eyes were bright, with an expression of gentleness and kindness that made Mr. Ashley feel suddenly glad to see him. In spite of his broad shoulders, he looked ill and weak. The tan topcoat he was wearing seemed too big for him everywhere except in the sleeves, which were too short.

The young man greeted him by name, holding out his hand..

Will shifted the letter and shook hands.

"I didn't recognize you, Eric," he said, soberly, not knowing just how to talk to him. He had known Eric before he had left Keton, six years before at eighteen, and he had talked to him then as a youth. Now he felt that he was speaking to a man.

"You haven't changed," said Eric. "I would have recognized you even without your mailbag. How is Mrs. Ashley?"

"Fine, just fine.. I have a boy, you know - yes, you knew that - he's nearly ten now. Oh, by the way, I have a letter for you."

He handed Eric the letter.

"Sort of special delivery," he mumbled.. "Well, gotta get on. Couple of letters for your family. Your aunt and cousin still there?"

Eric nodded, examining the letter, and Will Ashley continued his walk up the driveway to the big house. The postman looked around once before he reached the house, and saw that Eric was reading the letter. He delivered his letters and started on the return trip. Eric had gone on, probably on his

way downtown.

II

Two days before, on Sunday, Eric Tobin had come home after a six-year absence, and it seemed to him that he had returned to life. Somewhere on his journey from Maine to Boston and from Boston to Keton, a full day's trip by train, he had begun to feel the surge of new blood in his veins, but it was not until he reached Rutland, thirty miles outside of Keton, that his new life began to be marked by what he considered memorable events.

The train had stopped at Rutland for its usual twenty-minute wait to make connections with the New York train before continuing its trip north. It was about four-thirty in the afternoon, and the April sun was already within speaking distance of the Adirondacks in the west.

The few passengers were glad to get out and stretch their cramped muscles, but after standing for a minute or two they felt the effects of a brisk north wind unwarmed by the setting sun, and as though by common consent they all hurried into the station restaurant next to the waiting room.

For a while Eric remained in his seat at the rear of the first passenger car. From there he could see the conductor talking with one of the baggage men. He found it a pleasurable experience to sit still in his seat after the car had stopped, while the sensation of rapid motion continued. But pretty soon this sensation wore off, and restlessly Eric rose and walked.

down the aisle.

As he stood undecided in the entry-way of the train, the conductor, studying his watch and talking to the baggage man at the same time, turned his head and, seeing Eric, called -

"Better get off an' stretch. We'll be here for quite a spell."

Eric stepped down.. He felt a little dizzy; the ground seemed to be gently sliding under his feet.

"New York train's late," the conductor explained. "We won't be pullin' out fer half an hour or so." He snapped shut the cover of his watch and slipping it into his vest pocket turned again toward his companion.

Eric stood looking at him for the space of a few seconds, convinced that he had known the conductor somewhere, sometime before. He had had the same impression when he first saw the conductor on the train, walking down the aisle to collect tickets. He was a tall, stout man with a pudgy face and baby blue eyes. The eyes and the pleasant, chubby face looked familiar to Eric.

Unable to place him, Eric turned away and started walking along the tracks toward the back of the car. He had left his hat, topcoat, and gloves in the car, but in spite of the chill evening air he felt the urge to walk. His long legs were stiff from the train ride, and his spine ached. The rhythmic motion of walking with his arms swinging easily at his side felt restful and pleasant.

Twenty yards beyond the last car Eric lengthened his stride.

He took a deep breath, straightened his broad, thin shoulders, and pulled his head way back so that he was looking up at the faintly colored sky above the setting sun. He walked between the two pairs of tracks on a narrow cinder path worn smooth by the passage of many feet. Far ahead the tracks made a sudden sweep around a bend, and it looked as though the railroad had broken off at that point, and it was to this point that Eric had decided to walk.

He had not gone half way, however, when the exhilaration died away and fatigue set in; for he was easily tired. Stopping abruptly and looking back, he was surprised to see how close the train still seemed to be. A sudden impulse came over him to rush back and clamber aboard, and thus hasten his journey home. But he resisted and turned again toward the western mountains.

Standing there hatless, with his blond hair ruffled by the wind, which seemed strong enough to sway his slim body by its force, he seemed to take on a new stature and a look of defiance appeared in his thin face as he looked back over the way he had just traversed in the train. He didn't let his thoughts go back very far in time, for he had been warned against that, but he was mentally saying good-bye to what had been, to the life that he had left down there beyond, far beyond, the bend in the tracks. And his eyes, which ordinarily held a gentle questioning look, now were brilliant with fierce, defiant determination.

And as though he did not wish to prolong his leavetaking,

he turned suddenly on his heel, and standing in the same spot and facing toward the lowering Green Mountains in the east, he lifted his hands from his sides as though starting to take the distant landscape to his heart.

He was profoundly moved by his own reflections. He felt that he had renounced the past and opened his arms to the future. With the fulness of his heart he felt that those mountains in the east, not very many miles away, were home, and all the kaleidoscopic changes that they went through from rising sun to rising sun he was familiar with; they had been the sentinels of his childhood and his youth, and, God willing, they would remain so until his death and then stand guardian over his grave. The joy of seeing them, of being welcomed by them, of greeting them, was greater than he had dared to imagine; and it came upon him so suddenly that he was unprepared for it, for he had forgotten that from here he could see them just as well as he could see them from the doorstep of his home.

The momentary ecstasy passed, and he felt the wind seeping through his coat. He pulled his collar up and held it closed at his throat with the long white fingers of one hand, and the spot of color that had crept into each cheek died away leaving his face paler than it had been before. With his head bent forward and his shoulders hunched against the wind, he hurried back the way he had come and entered the waiting room.

The conductor, the only other occupant of the room, was seated near the radiator, on the side of the room opposite the

door, going over his accounts. His hat was pushed far back on his bald head, and he held a large pad on his knee; he was jotting down figures, moistening the point of his pencil with his lips at regular intervals. He looked toward the door to see if it had been shut tight.

"Come over by the radiator," he said to Eric, who was shivering uncontrollably as he entered. "Should think you'd a froze to death without a coat on."

Eric walked over and stood close to the radiator. He studied the conductor's profile, still wondering where he had seen the man before, and he pressed the back of his legs and as much of his body as he could against the warm heater. Eric wanted to talk to the man, and find out who he was, but he didn't dare interrupt his laborious figuring.

A little while later the door opened and the baggage-man burst into the room as though he had been blown in by the wind. He was a little man, with a turned up nose and an impudent, somewhat callous expression. The only sign of his official capacity was a cap similar to the conductor's, which he wore cocked at an extraordinary angle on one side of his head, resting on his ear, and which had a silver plate across the front with the word Trainman lettered on it.

"Boy oh boy," he said slamming the door behind him. "She's really blowing a gale. Wouldn't surprise me to see snow up the line." He walked over on the balls of his feet to where the conductor was sitting and sat down beside him. "'arm enough in here."

Noticing Eric by the radiator he grinned broadly, showing the ragged edges of his short discolored teeth.

"Get what you wanted up the tracks?" he asked good-naturedly.

Eric nodded smiling, his thin lips still blue from the cold.

"Didn't have to go so far," said the baggage man, pointing to the door of the men's room at one end of the waiting room. "They got rest rooms even in Vermont."

Eric looked. "Oh, it wasn't that," he said hurriedly, with embarrassment. "I just wanted to have a walk and a look around."

The conductor closed his account book with a snap. He took his cap off and carefully placed a small sheet of paper in it. He stroked his bald head with a big red hand that matched his florid face. "Don't say anything against Vermont, Jim," he said. "You're speakin' to at least one native and maybe two."

"You come from Vermont?" asked Jim, looking Eric up and down. "You don't look like a Vermonter."

Eric put his hands behind his back to warm them on the radiator. "Yes," he said. "This is the first time I've been here in six years, though."

"Don't blame you for that," Jim said pertly.

"Funny," he continued after a moment of silence, "I always thought Norrie, here," indicating the conductor with a jerk of his chin, "was a typical Vermonter. Now you got me all bawled up - tall, thin, and sharp lookin'; and Norrie here

short, fat, and stupid lookin'." He broke into a shrill laugh at the end.

"Can't all be wise New Yorkers," retorted Norrie, the conductor, "or there wouldn't be no suckers for them to live off of." He winked at the passenger. "What part of Vermont you come from?"

Jim interrupted with another cackling laugh. "What part! There ain't only one part and that's the whole damn thing."

"I'm from Keton," Eric said.

"That's right, sure, I noticed by your ticket. Meant to ask you, know a fellow named Glenn Ayres there?"

In a flash the vague familiarity which Eric recognized in the conductor's face resolved itself into an identity. He bore a close resemblance to Mr. Ayres, the grocery man in Keton.

The conductor, mistaking his silence, continued. "Runs a grocery store there on the main street, North Street."

"Yes," Eric said, delighted at having solved the mystery which had been troubling him and at seeing a bond between himself and the conductor. "Yes, I know him. I remember him very well. Ayres' grocery. I used to go in there often. He looks like you only shorter and younger looking."

"Yep. He is. He's my kid brother. Got a job in Keton when he was sixteen and never left. Funniest thing you ever saw."

Eric said, "I thought I had seen you somewhere before, but I guess it was just the resemblance between you and your

brother. My name is Eric Tobin."

The conductor nodded an acknowledgement.

"Small world," said Jim.

"This is Jim Hatch," Norrie said casually. "He's from New York."

The little man jumped up and extended his hand. "Glad to meetcha," he said, but his cordiality had more impudence in it than politeness.

Eric shook hands and sat down on the bench opposite the two men. He felt warm again.

Jim spoke with just a slight note of apology. "Don't really mean what I say about Vermont." He pronounced it with the accent on the first syllable, which Eric found irritating. "Just like to kid Norrie, seein' as he's a native son."

The conductor said, "He's got a chip on his shoulder because he's such a little runt."

The baggage man glared. Eric started to smile but stopped with his thin lips half parted. There was an uncomfortable silence; Norrie tapped the paper which he had put into his cap, and then put his cap on, taking great pains and some time to get it into the desired position. He turned his head suddenly toward the baggage-man. "Well, don't try to stare me into the floor; them tactics don't work on me." Nevertheless he shifted uneasily. "Don't take a hell of a lot to make him sore," he said, turning appealingly to the passenger.

Eric was half amused and half worried. Behind him the

ticket window flew up with a bang, and a sallow-faced, youngish looking man peered out.

"What, no customers?" he said, with forced liveliness.

The baggage man turned his glare toward the ticket-seller. "Don't be too astonished," he said with exaggerated sarcasm, "but for once in your life there ain't nobody here to buy a ticket."

The conductor guffawed, although somewhat affectedly. He leaned over and patted the little fellow on the back. "Nice goin', Jim," he said.

Jim gave him a broad wink.

"Sure?" asked the ticket-seller, looking doubtfully at Eric.

"Damn sure," said Jim.. And Eric shook his head.

"She's comin' in two minutes," the ticket man said, pulling the window half way down. Then he added, "Don't be in any hurry though; your engineer's gone and busted a water pipe, and you won't be movin' till we get it fixed." He banged the window shut.

"How long?" asked the conductor, but it was too late. "Now ain't that a hell of a note; that'll put us back another half-hour." He pulled out his watch and began to study it.

Jim settled back into his seat and tried to tuck his chin under the loose collar of his shirt. "If it ain't one thing it's two others," he mumbled.

Eric asked, "Do you think it will take long?"

"Twenty minutes late now," Norrie said. "We'll probably

be an hour late by the time we get to keton. Maybe more."

Eric got up and walked to the door. With his hands in his pockets he looked through the window next to the door.

"You in any hurry," asked the conductor.

"No," said Eric. "Just restless." He pressed the side of his face against the glass to look up the tracks. "Here she comes," he said with a little thrill of excitement in his voice. "Just coming around the bend." And as he said this the sound of the whistle reached them.

The ticket window flew up. "Here she is," said the ticket-seller," and he slammed the window shut.

"And here I go," said Jim. Rising, he pulled the collar of his thick shirt up around his neck and pulled his cap down more firmly on the side of his head. "See yuh later," he said to Eric as he went out.

Unwillingly the conductor rose too. "Ain't nothing for me to do except answer questions till my ears freeze off." As the engine of the train from New York rumbled past, he went out.

Eric peered out the window. Although it was only five o'clock, dusk was already beginning to settle. The lights of the newly arrived train looked weak and sickly in the partial daylight outside. The hiss of escaping steam from the train could be heard in the waiting room, and the rumble of the baggage cart as it went by the door to load up at the baggage car. Norrie and a conductor from the new train stood talking beside the entrance to one of the cars; they were interrupted by several of the passengers as they got off. Eric counted

about a dozen people, men and women, as they descended the steps of the car, loitered a moment to get their bearings, and then hurried toward the dining room. One or two stood beside the tracks, watching the uncoupling of the engine and the unloading of the baggage. At last even they had gone into the restaurant, and the two conductors were left, chatting and watching the baggage-men. A few of the former occupants of the restaurant came out and looked around curiously - one or two went back in, and a couple got back on the train.

Thirty or forty yards on the other side of the tracks, Eric could see the second story of a large wooden building which looked like a granary. In the only window he could see, the shutters were closed, but the slats on one side of the shutters seemed to be in perpetual motion. It looked strange to see the thin slats of one side flapping idly while those of the other were perfectly still. The wind, he decided, was coming from the north, and by some freak of the wind-current it touched only one side of the window. Over the shingled roof of the building and many miles beyond, he could see the hazy, dark outline of the mountains, their rolling silhouette shaded almost blue by the atmosphere. There was no sign of snow, even on the highest peaks.

The new conductor, wrapped in a heavy blue overcoat, picked up the lunch pail at his feet and moved away. He waved goodbye to Norrie, who bustled shivering toward the waiting-room door. He entered grumbling at the wind and bore down on the radiator across the room.

"Got a good twenty minutes before we'll get out of here," he told Eric. He pressed up against the radiator and slapped his bare hands in rythm against its hot surface. "Nothing more comfortable than a hot radiator, 'cept a woman," he said smacking his heavy lips.

Eric had turned aside from the window and was watching him with a sympathetic expression.

"Just seen one get off the train -- you see her?" Eric shook his head no. "Let me tell you, m'boy, she could do a good job of keepin' a man warm. Looks it anyways. Built like an old-fashioned brick -- you know -- an' warm lookin' enough to melt you on the spot." He pushed his hat back on his head. "Phew, makes me not to tthink about ner. Comes up this way from New York 'bout every Sunday night lately. Changes here to my train and gets off at -- say, maybe you know her -- gets off at Keton. Know any beautiful gals in Keton?"

Eric shook his head with a smile. "I don't remember any. Of course, six years --"

"You'd remember this one if you'd seen her. Probably she wasn't growed up, though, when you left. Growed up now, though."

"I suppose some of the ugly little girls I used to see running around the streets have grown up to be quite pretty by now."

"Took the words out of my mouth." The conductor's voice carried easily across the room in spite of a slight hoarseness. "Sfunny how gals grow up and get pretty. Got one myself, ugly as sin, about thirteen -- thirteen next September. Give her

time, I tell my wife; they're all ugly at that age. Thin as a rail. You'd never think it to look at me." He patted his paunch affectionately and barked out a laugh.

The door flew open, and Jim, the baggage-man entered, his face almost completely hidden in the collar of his shirt.

Norrie waited for him to close the door, and continued.

"Take Jim, now; he's got a girl in every station. Only trouble is the train don't stop long enough for'm to get to first base."

Jim walked over and sat down where he had been sitting before. "If we always stopped as long as this time, I could get to home plate without even slidin'."

The conductor roared and looked at Eric to see if he appreciated the little man's humor. Eric's thin smile was enough to bring him into the conversation without making him a part of it.

"Bet if you had to slide it wouldn't be on your back," Norrie said, and roared again.

A woman of about thirty entered, dressed in a rather worn tweed coat. She was leading by the hand a little girl of five or six, warmly bundled in a brown ski suit and a red and brown cap with earlaps. She looked around uncertainly and then sat down on the nearest bench, pulling the little girl up beside her. She fumbled with the coat of the little girl's ski suit, and pushed her own coat back over her shoulders.

The conductor sat down beside the baggage-man and began talking to him in a low voice. Jim, still half hidden in his shirt, seemed on the point of going to sleep.

From his post at the front window, Eric watched the woman and the child, who were sitting to his right on the other side of the door. The little girl, blue eyed and chubby, was peering curiously at the conductor on the other side of the room; she could see only his head and shoulders rising above the back of the bench in which he was seated. She whispered to her mother, with her eyes turned slantwise to keep the conductor in view.

"No," her mother said, loudly enough for Eric to hear; "that's another one. The one on our train went home."

The little girl started to whisper again, and then spoke aloud. "Is this one going to take us home?"

"I think so." The young woman unfastened the strap under the girl's chin and pulled off her hat. The little girl's hair was blond and straight, matted down by the warmth and the weight of her cap. Her mother ruffled it up and then straightened it with a few deft touches.

The door opened again from the outside, cutting off Eric's vision. A young woman entered, a fine black net veil over her face. She was followed by a striking looking man, fairly young, probably still in his twenties, a little over medium height, heavy set and strong in appearance.

The low hum of conversation between the conductor and the baggage-man stopped. Eric looked toward the two men and found the conductor trying to catch his eye. Norrie gave him a prolonged agonized wink, and pointed significantly at the woman who had just come in, shaking his head as if to affirm

what he had said. Eric remembered his mentioning the beautiful woman who had got off the train and he gathered that this was the one.

Eric turned his head to look at her and found that she was watching him. Behind her veil he could see only a vague outline of her face, but a pair of coal-black eyes, as deeply black as any he had ever seen, burned through the veil into his own. She turned to the man standing beside her and spoke to him softly; he turned and looked at Eric for a moment. Eric thought he saw something familiar about the man's face, was about to nod, and then on second thought decided that he was wrong. The new-comers turned away and found a seat at the further end of the room, at the end opposite the ticket window. The conversation between the baggage-man and the conductor resumed.

Eric decided that he had seen the man before. At the first glance he had been almost sure of it, but his second look made him doubt it. He had on a rather plain brown overcoat with the collar turned up and a brown hat, both of which looked old but were not yet conspicuously shabby. He must have been very nearly six feet tall, but he looked less because of his breadth. He sat with his hands stuffed into his overcoat pockets; he looked straight ahead with a sullen, discontented air. His face looked disagreeable, almost forbidding, but at the same time very intelligent and domineering.

The girl was dressed in a grayish brown fur coat, rather expensive looking, with a becoming fur cap, Russian style, which

matched the coat, and which gave her an attractive exotic appearance. She sat comfortably relaxed on the bench, her veil pulled back over her hat, with her head resting on the back of the seat and against the wall behind it. Her full red lips were turned up at one corner in a contented smile, which to Eric looked forced. The striking paleness of her face was accentuated by the redness of her lips, which were the only part of her face made up.

There was a remarkable resemblance in the face of the two people, which Eric suddenly noticed. The eyes of both were alike very black; but those of the man were piercing and defiant, while the girl's were deep and somewhat mellow in spite of a certain incongruous coldness that gave her a peculiarly calculating look. Both had the same pale complexion and the same thin, delicately lined nose. The girl's lips, however, were full, exquisitely curved, and rather sensual; but the man's were thin, straight-set, and bloodless. The resemblance between the two was hardly noticeable at first glance because of their contrasting expressions; the girl's face was carelessly and pleasantly relaxed, while the man's was strained, gloomy, and vindictive.

Eric recognized the man first and smiled at himself for not doing so sooner; but he had changed so remarkably since Eric had last seen him that the association came with difficulty. He was Albert Comfort, and the girl was his sister. He had hardly ever seen the two together at Keton, although they were, in face, twins. It had been eight years since Eric had last

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seen the man, for he had left Keton - to join the Navy as Eric recalled - two years before Eric himself had left. He remembered the girl with difficulty; she had been eighteen when he had left, and that would make her twenty-four now, but in those six years she had developed from a rather plain-looking girl into a singular beauty. For the life of him he couldn't remember her first name.

Abruptly making up his mind Eric walked over to greet them. He stood in front of them for a minute not knowing which one to speak to first and suddenly uncertain of his first conviction. The young man looked at him blankly without rising.

Eric smiled down at them pleasantly. "Aren't you from Keton?" He looked at the girl as he spoke.

She smiled impersonally and with a shade of affectation, as though enjoying his discomfiture.

"Yes," she said.

Eric felt relieved. He said, "I am too. I'm Eric Tobin; but you probably don't remember me."

Albert stood up. He held out his hand irritably, apparently anxious to get the greeting over with. He gave Eric's hand a brief shake and sat down again..

"Don't you know us?" asked the girl. She gave a little laugh that came harshly from her chest and sounded coarse.

"I... yes, of course. At first I didn't... you've changed so much. You were only..." He held up his hand to indicate her height....just a little girl when I saw you last."

He felt that he was appearing ridiculous and couldn't tell

why. The girl's harsh laugh sounded unpleasant. He looked around and saw the little girl sitting near the door watching the scene with great interest. Her mother looked up from a magazine, caught his eye, and bent her head again to her reading.

"Won't you sit down?"

The girl spoke as though she didn't want him to accept the invitation, but she pulled her coat in close to her legs to make room for him on the bench although there was plenty of room without that. Puzzled, Eric sat down beside her.

"You've forgotten our names," the girl said pleasantly. She was leaning back again with her head against the wall and looking at the ceiling.

Albert spoke with something like a sneer. "No, he hasn't."

"No, I haven't... that is... I've forgotten your first name... I remember Albert all right... but...."

"Eileen," she said.

Eric looked at her questioningly. The name didn't sound right; he thought she was joking.

"Don't you believe me?" She rolled her head languidly to look at him.

He was painfully earnest and couldn't keep from staring at her. "I believe you," he said quietly. "I didn't remember your name, and when you said it, it sounded strange; it doesn't seem to fit you."

Her brother grunted derisively but said nothing. She kept looking at him curiously and then turned her eyes away,

apparently not quite satisfied with her inspection. In spite of her languid pose there was an air of restlessness about her; she gave the impression of being on the point of jumping up at any moment, of being ready to act on the first impulse that came to her mind. Eric sensed a strained atmosphere between the two and guessed that they had been quarreling. There was a prolonged silence, embarrassing to Eric, who had spoken last and felt responsible. He wanted to get up and leave, but he felt that would be more awkward than to stay. They were trying to make him uncomfortable, and he thought he knew why. Eileen was humming softly to herself.

Albert turned toward him; there was a hint of a sneer on his face as he spoke..

"My mother, you know", never told us anything about you; we heard it from other sources."

Eric was startled by his abruptness. He didn't know what to say. Eileen caught her breath and stopped humming. Albert looked him full in the face, almost insultingly.

He was surprised at the calmness of his own voice when he finally spoke.

"There's no secret about it," he said. "I suppose people usually try to hide a thing like that when it happens to them or in their family. I don't feel that way. I don't mind your mentioning it." His voice was gentle, kindly. He felt that he was being too patronizing.

Albert grunted contemptuously.

In his mind Eric could see the face of old Doctor Sharon,

his bright little eyes shining at him, benevolent wrinkles creasing his face, but his thin lips parted in a cold smile.. In the eyes of the world, my boy, you will never again be quite sane. But don't let that bother you. Don't try to hide anything. And above all don't be afraid; nobody can hurt you except yourself, even though it'll seem that they're all trying to do you dirt. They'll suspect you, my boy. They'll suspect you, my boy.. Eric tried to shake away the vision of the old doctor; he had always thought of him as a mean little man, with meanness shining out of his bright blue eyes, but when they had parted Eric had felt a sudden warmth toward him, had almost liked him.

Eileen was looking at him sideways.

"I was thinking of a man at the hospital, a doctor, who told me not to mind that. It's hard to act natural, though, when people don't think of you as being natural."

"You're doing very well," she said. "I suppose you haven't even noticed that everybody in the room is staring at you."

It was true. The little girl was leaning against her mother's knees and watching him curiously. The mother looked back quickly at her magazine as he turned his head. The conductor gave a nod and a wink of approval, and Jim the baggage-man looked steadily at Eileen. Eric blushed with confusion, and then he laughed quietly.

"It's not that there's anything wrong with me," he said.

"Children love to watch anyone who is talking; and the conductor

is an admirer of yours. He spoke to me about you before you came in."

Albert looked up suddenly, his face hard. "What did he say?"

"What do you care what he said," Eileen asked softly.

Albert slumped back in his seat. "I don't," he said.

"Oh, nothing uncomplimentary," Eric said. "He just asked me if I knew that beautiful woman who had got off the New York train. He said you changed here practically every Sunday and got off at Keton."

"That's a lie," said Albert, glaring at Eric. "This is the second or third time she's done it."

"Oh, but it isn't, Albert," she said, and there was a mocking reproof in her voice. "I've been making the trip quite steadily all year; the conductor should know me by this time."

Albert's face was dark with rage. "You don't have to publish the fact," he snarled, "to a --- to a nitwit."

Eileen glanced at him quickly and then at Eric. She put out her hand as though to stop her brother and let it drop gently on Eric's hand.

Eric was very pale, but he wasn't angry. He was looking at Albert wonderingly, as though seeing him for the first time. For what seemed a long time they looked into each other's eyes, and at last Albert turned his head away.

"I'm sorry," Eric said. There was genuine sympathy in his voice, as though he had been really at fault and had

insulted the other. "I didn't understand you at first, but now I see... You are very troubled... I shouldn't have bothered you."

He got to his feet awkwardly. Eileen was looking at him in amazement.

"You're not going?" she said. There was a hint of scorn in her tone.

"Yes," he said. "Perhaps some other time.... I...." He turned and walked toward the door, conscious of the little girl's curious eyes, and wondering if the conductor and Jim were watching him. He was half way across the floor when Albert rushed up behind him and took his arm. He stopped but Albert urged him on. "Come on," Albert said, his voice choked but friendly. He opened the door and guided Eric through. "We can take a walk while we're waiting. She's a dirty skunk," he added under his breath.

Outside the station they turned to the left and walked along beside the train toward the rear of the cars. Albert had grasped Eric by the arm just above the elbow and was half pushing him along as though he were in a hurry to get somewhere. They hurried along in silence until they were in back of the last car. Albert suddenly stopped.

"We can't go any further," he said. "We'll lose our train." He seemed to be considering whether he shouldn't after all plunge on with his companion and walk on up the tracks.

He faced Eric abruptly and looked searchingly into his eyes. He was pale, and his face was set and tense except for

his lips, which were parted in a half smile, which made him look nervous and almost silly. His broad shoulders were hunched up to his neck to protect him from the cold, but his overcoat was open. Eric waited patiently, saying nothing, his brow creased thoughtfully and his eyes gently questioning.

"That sister of mine is a bitch," Albert said, speaking in a low tone with an undercurrent of rage that seemed ready to break through at any moment. "She did that on purpose. She wanted to make a scene. She likes to make scenes so that she can show how self-possessed she is. Do you believe me? She would have been happy if she could have humiliated both of us. And she would sit there perfectly calm and.... and not a part of it at all.... perfectly self-possessed. She's a skunk."

"You shouldn't say such things about your sister," Eric said.

"Don't worry. I've said worse than that to her face. You don't feel offended, do you, at what I said to you?"

He went on without waiting for an answer. "That woman in there with the little girl used to be her best friend - they don't speak any more - you'll find out why - but Eileen was showing off." ---- "I shouldn't have blown off the handle. I'm sorry. It was her, though, that I wanted to hurt, not you."

"I knew that," said Eric. "I knew your words meant nothing against me."

"I did really think you were... you know... at first. But now I know you're perfectly sane, saner than I am, probably."

He took Eric's elbow and started to lead him back toward the station. The engine was backing up toward the cars.

"You know why she makes these trips don't you?" He stopped again so that he could look into Eric's eyes. Eric said nothing.

"She visits a man in New York, a married man with two kids, a doctor. He pays her way down and back every week-end, and he goes out with her on the sly." He looked searchingly into Eric's eyes to see what impression his words had made.

Eric moved forward. "The train's almost ready to go," he said. People were filing out of the waiting room and the restaurant. Eric saw Eileen standing by the door. Albert walked along beside him, leaning close and talking into his ear. "You'll find out about it anyway, in Keton - everybody knows it there.

"I followed her down and caught her. I told her if she did it again I'd cut his heart out."

Eric saw Eileen climb into the train, and the conductor waved at them to hurry. He quickened his pace.

"She wouldn't give a damn if I did. That's the kind she is. She's just working him."

Eric started to climb the steps of the platform and Albert followed him.

"Sit with me," said Albert. "Let that bitch sit by herself."

They sat down together three or four seats in front of Eileen. Two seats farther down on the other side of the aisle sat the little girl and the mother who had been sitting

in the waiting room.

"I'm sorry for you," said Eric sincerely, "and for her."
He felt the cold sweat drying on his back, and his hands trembled
for a long time while he listened to his companion talk.

III

As the train came into Keton, Eric saw his mother standing by the tracks peering anxiously into the windows of the train. He tried to wave to her, but somebody brushed by him and intercepted the motion. He took his bag down from the rack; it was very heavy because he had packed in everything that he would need for the trip and for the day or two he would have to wait before his trunk should arrive. Albert, waiting in the aisle for his sister, caught Eric by the arm.

"Come down to my house tomorrow afternoon. I want to talk some more to you." He spoke almost fiercely; it was more of a command than a request.

Eric nodded, but Albert wouldn't let go of his arm.

"Don't forget, now."

Eric said, "All right. About three."

Albert was satisfied and released his grip. Eric moved toward the door as the train stopped.

Norrie, standing at the foot of the steps, helped him down with his suitcase.

"Tell my brother you saw me."

Eric hardly had time to nod before he was in his mother's arms. She hugged him convulsively, her face radiant and her eyes full of tears. He felt the tears coming to his own eyes as he bent down to kiss her.

He heard a voice behind him saying, "Don't forget, tomorrow afternoon at three." And then another voice, Eileen's, "How do you do, Mrs. Tobin." Then the familiar "All aboard" of the conductor.

His mother was trying to pick up his suitcase.

"I've got everything ready," she said. "A nice hot dinner, your old room all fixed up -- Mrs. Comfort did that -- but I arranged the furniture and the pictures -- and --"

He laughed and took the suitcase away from her. She led him by the arm, much as Albert had done in Rutland.

"The taxi's up here," she explained. "Bill Alexander still drives it. He hasn't changed a bit. Nothing has. Wait till you see. Everything the same."

He looked back and saw Eileen and Albert walking together toward their home on the other side of town. Just at that moment Eileen turned her head, saw he was watching, and waved. He looked away quickly, feeling guilty. He felt like a traitor after having listened to her brother's repeated denunciations on the way from Rutland.

Bill Alexander opened the taxi door for them. He returned Eric's greeting with a surly nod, and slammed the door shut with a violence that shook the car. Bill had graduated from high school twenty-four years ago with highest honors in English, and since then had been doing odd jobs and dreaming of great things. He was a massive man, tall and very fleshy. He had to bend almost double to get into the car, and the steering wheel rubbed against his paunch as he drove. For the

last ten years he had been driving the only taxi in Keton. He met the first train at 6:31 in the morning, the second at 12 noon, and the last at 6:10 p.m. During the intervals he sat in his taxi at the parking space near the station or in the waiting room near the telephone booth, reading a magazine or newspaper.. Only rarely was he heard to speak, and then it was to say something sarcastic or nasty. His eyes were swollen and bulging, his lips set in a continual bulging pout, and his face was red and bloated, although it was said that he never touched a drink or a cigarette.

Eric was surprised at how little his mother had changed in her physical appearance. Perhaps she was a shade thinner, but otherwise the years had neither added nor taken away. He looked for gray in her blond hair, but could see none even though she had taken off her hat when she got into the car. Her face was smooth and rosy. She looked like a little school girl.

"I've been on edge all day," she was saying. "It started to snow about lunch time, and I called up in the afternoon to see if the train was on time. They said it was snowing harder down the line and the train would be late. You can't imagine how excited we've been, everybody, even Cleone, and you know how quiet she is."

"Is she quiet?"

"Oh, yes. Cleone has grown into such a lovely girl. You won't recognize her."

"She was twelve when I saw her last."

His mother gasped. "So long ago as that?" Oh, then you won't recognize her. I didn't think it was so long. But of course it is; she was still in grammar school."

"How is Aunt Myra?"

"She's so anxious to see you. She's fine, of course. But Uncle Jim was awfully good to her, you know, and she misses him terribly; you don't get over a thing like that very quickly. Uncle Jim was a fine man." Mrs. Tobin sighed. "He was a good man, too. Cleone is every inch her father."

Eric looked out the window and through the darkness saw the white stones of the cemetery, one or two of them reflecting the glint of a distant light.

"She's like her mother, too, prettier I think than her mother was when she was young, although I don't think there was ever a prettier bride than Myra."

His mother broke off and looked at him searchingly. She leaned over and spoke to him in a whisper.

"Do you feel all right after... after the train ride? Did it tire you?" She squeezed his hand.

"Oh, no. I feel fine, Mother. Happy, very happy."

It was a shock to him to be suddenly made aware of his condition. He felt a sudden emptiness that was doubly depressing after the joyful elevation of his homecoming. His mother was looking at him with a worried expression. He patted her hand.

"You don't have to worry, Mother. I'm all right now. Did you get the Doctor's letter?"

His mother's face relaxed and the worry disappeared.

"Yes," she said joyfully, but still in a whisper. He said such nice things about you, that you were perfectly all right, that there was absolutely no danger unless...."

She broke off. She realized that she had blundered as usual. The doctor had warned her to stay as far from the subject of the past as she could, not to remind him, try to let him forget. There would be intervals, he had said, during which he would forget, and those intervals would grow longer and longer until at last he would give it only an occasional thought as of an incident which had happened and had passed away.

"Don't worry," Eric said, patting her hand, "Don't worry."

Cleone and Aunt Myra were standing on the porch as the car reached the end of the long driveway, and Mrs. Comfort was behind them, standing in the doorway.

It was eight-thirty when they all sat down to dinner. Eric had taken his suitcase upstairs to his room, had washed and changed his clothes. He felt tired enough to go right to bed, but he was very hungry, too. His room was one of the smallest in the house; he had always preferred it to any of the big rooms, and now he felt a warm sense of security and peace as he entered it. The single bed was covered with a dark blue bedspread with white cotton ridges running in a crisscross pattern. There was only one window, a large one, which looked out on the high hedge which separated the house from the hayfield on

the south side, and directly below the window was the driveway which ran completely around the house. The bed was on the opposite side of the room from the window; beside the window was a large leather bound easy chair with a floor lamp behind it and a bookcase full of his favorite books in the corner in front of it. There was a bedside table near the head of the bed, a bureau with a mirror near the foot, and a closet opposite the entrance door. Three or four pictures hung about the room, a college banner, and an embroidered tapestry just over the head of the bed. Everything was just as he had left it three years before, even to the comb and brush on the bureau -- and he looked at the brush to see if some of his hair were not still in it, but it was clean.

His door was open a crack and he could hear the buzz of voices downstairs. He shut the door and began to unpack his suitcase. They had looked at him as all the others did who knew, questioningly and a little anxiously. His aunt had kissed him on the cheek and had given him a strong hug, but he sensed a lack of warmth in her greeting, a gingerliness, as though she were lighting her favorite firecracker, loving it and yet afraid to hear it go off. Cleone had taken his hand quietly and had kissed him on the lips. For several minutes he had been unable to find anything to say to them. And then Mrs. Comfort had shaken hands with him, looking at him with those vague clouded eyes of hers and saying nothing. It had all seemed unreal, as though he were treading the boards of a stage, and doing a poor job of acting. It was not until he

had got into his little room that he felt real again.

Of course, he had got out of the habit of meeting people; all this was new to him, and the newness combined with the friendly warm emotion of going home made everything seem strange. It was like coming home in high spirits from a party and being greeted at your door by someone you had never seen.

In his bathrobe he crossed the hall to the bathroom and took a quick shower. All this would be new and strange for some time to come, he thought. They had often had guests in the old days, but never anyone living right in the house with them, except Mrs. Comfort, who was almost like part of the furniture anyway. He wondered how long his aunt and his cousin would stay, how they would all get on together and what kind of routine their lives would finally fall into. He felt a satisfaction that there were three bathrooms in the house, one at each end of the hall, and one downstairs, and this one probably no one else would ever use. He finished drying himself, combed his hair, and crossed into his bedroom.

Rest, the doctor had said, and quiet. But mingle with people as much as you can. Do you good. But don't let yourself get tangled up in their troubles; let them figure their own way out; don't worry about them. When you start worrying about other people, forget them, and when you start worrying about yourself, forget that too. Watch yourself, and when you find yourself thinking about any one thing too long or too often, dismiss it and don't think about it again. Perhaps the doctor had told his mother the same thing and she had asked

Aunt Myra and Cleone to stay with them for a while so that there would be more people in the house. "Well, that was all right; they were both nice people.

"Dinner, Eric," his mother called from downstairs.

He knotted his tie quickly, put on his vest and coat, and went downstairs. They were in the living room. He paused outside to think of something he could say when he went in, but nothing came to him. He felt embarrassed and self-conscious when he entered.

Cleone was looking through a picture album. She looked up and smiled.

"I was just looking at your picture when you were six years old. You look like a little devil."

His aunt said, "Isn't he the handsome fellow when he gets dressed up."

"Oh, Eric," said his mother, "you didn't have to dress. You'll probably want to go to bed early anyway after that long trip.

"I thought it might help to get the wrinkles out of my suit if I wore it for a while."

"Two of your suits are in the downstairs closet," Mrs. Tobin said. She laid aside her knitting and got up. "Come on folks, it's time to eat -- and you can buy a new one tomorrow."

"See," said Cleone, standing beside him and holding out the album.

He laughed.

"My how you've changed," she said laughing.

They followed the two older women into the dining room.

During the meal everything went very well except that half way through Eric became aware of a dull headache, the first he had had in nearly six months.

"You've got to get out and get some sun," his aunt said.

"It doesn't look right to see a man almost six feet and as broad as you are with a face like a new coat of white wash."

Eric looked at his white hands ruefully.

"Give him time, Mother," Cleone said. "You were pale too, until you had about a week of this Vermont air."

"Eric has always been pale," his mother remarked. "Even in the summer. He never burns."

There was a silence, and then his mother spoke again.

"Jim was the one who used to get tan, positively...."

Eric saw her bite her lip as she realized she had slipped into forbidden territory. He didn't dare look at his aunt, wondering what effect the mention of her husband would have.

"I get positively black," said Cleone quickly, a little awkwardly. "I was mistaken for a colored girl once," she added laughing.

Mrs. Comfort came in with the dessert. Eric looked at her with a new interest, trying to find in her face a likeness to Eileen or to Albert. He tried to imagine her face thinner, her eyes brighter, and her hair black instead of gray, but he couldn't do it; she was too persistently individual. In some people, women especially, it was quite possible to imagine away the wrinkles, the excess flesh, the gray hair, and all the other

marks that age had put upon them, and to see the healthful youthful contours that had once been, like removing the mask of years and seeing fresh beneath it the true personality. But with Mrs. Comfort that was impossible; her face now was so much a part of what she really seemed to be that she seemed to be as unchangeable as a statue. Still, very faintly, he could see an occasional resemblance. The nose, straight, delicate, patrician, recalled Eileen; and her lips, though thinner than Eileen's, were curved in the same soft line as her daughter's lips. Eric wanted to tell her that he had met the twins, but he thought better of it and decided to visit her in the kitchen after supper.

"Do you want coffee, Eric?" his mother asked.

He nodded.

"Three, Natalie, Cleone, Myra, and Eric."

He saw Cleone watching him and felt forced to say something. But he was tongue-tied. He admired the steady candor of her clear gray eyes.

"What are you thinking of, Eric?" his mother asked.

"I am thinking of how beautiful Cleone's eyes are."

They laughed, and a pleased little blush crept into his cousin's cheeks. His aunt looked at him sharply; and he realized that she had not spoken since his mother had let slip the remark about Uncle Jim.

"I saw Eileen and Albert on the train," he said.

"Who are they, pray?" asked his aunt in an exasperated tone.

"They're..." his mother stopped as Mrs. Comfort entered

with the coffee. "Let's take our coffee inside," she said.

They all got up. Mrs. Comfort turned her eyes away quickly when he looked at her, and Eric felt that she had heard. They went into the living room, Mrs. Tobin carrying the tray with the cups and the pot of coffee.

"Well, who are they?" Mrs. Halliday repeated as they sat down.

Mrs. Tobin poured the coffee and passed it around before answering, while Aunt Myra fidgeted. Cleone looked at Eric curiously, and then smiled.

"Eileen and Albert," Mrs. Tobin began, settling herself in her chair and taking up her knitting. She paused, feeling around with her misguided sense of the dramatic for the proper timing. Eric felt an almost overwhelming desire to laugh at his mother.

"Are the twins," she continued, and settled back in her chair as though the matter were closed.

Eric felt at that moment almost on the point of hysterics. The dull ache in his head had begun to pound, and it was only by compressing his lips tightly that he could keep from laughing, and he knew that if he were to start laughing he might not be able to stop. It was all so ridiculous. His mother had leaned back in the chair too far, and she was so snort that she was almost lying down; she had to hold her knitting up off her lap in order to see it. And she would have to lie in that awkward position until someone said something that would allow her to let go of the dramatic moment, to release the

gesture of finality and come back to normal. The coffee cup trembled in his hand, and some of the coffee spilled into the saucer. He set the cup down on the floor. Then feeling ill at ease as he straightened up, he bent down and picked it up again. He saw Cleone's steady gray eyes watching him. All the blood rushed from his head and face, and he felt a sickening sensation in his stomach.

"Well, Mary," Mrs. Halliday said in an exasperated voice, "Who are the twins?"

"They're very nice," Eric said weakly in a choked voice.

His own voice sounded strange to him, as though someone else had spoken. He found himself thinking of the words objectively. They meant nothing; they were intended to prove that he was still able to speak; they sounded like the few isolated patters of rain on a tin roof, or the sprinkle of water from a branch after the rain had stopped. Cleone must be still watching him, but he didn't dare to look at her.

He saw that his mother had become conscious of her awkward position. She wanted to straighten up with her next words. She had settled back in that attitude for effect, and now she felt that it had been too obvious and if she were to straighten up now under her sister-in-law's querulous eye the affectation would be revealed. She had to stay there, even though the back of her neck ached and she could breathe only with difficulty, to make it appear natural and that she preferred that position. Eric felt his own breath coming with difficulty, as though he had asthma, while he looked at his mother.

"The twins," his mother said, "are Natalie's two children. A boy and a girl. One twenty-four and the other... oh, they're both twenty-four, but I always think of the boy, Albert, as older."

Again Eric almost burst out laughing. He trembled, afraid that someone else might laugh and make him lose control. He didn't dare put his coffee cup to his lips; the cup was still as full as it had been except for what he had spilled in the saucer. With every pulse beat he could feel a thudding blow in his head.

"Albert," Mrs. Tobin said, and then she stopped, set her knitting aside, and got up. The look of relief on her face was quickly replaced by concern. She tiptoed across the room, and parting the curtains looked across the hall into the dining room. Satisfied with her inspection, she came back and sat down on the edge of the chair, her knitting once again in her hands.

Mrs. Halliday snorted. Eric realized suddenly that he had lost his battle for control. His muscle had gone fluid; his head was swimming, and his eyes were misty with tears. He felt the splatter of coffee on the back of his hand. Through a haze he heard his mother's voice.

"Albert has funny ideas about politics; he studies an awful lot. And Eileen, at least this is what people say, is... is... going out..."

His aunt's voice broke in loudly in bitingly sarcastic tone.

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"In other words one is a communist and the other's a whore."

Through a persistent humming in his ears he heard a high, shrill laugh, and he realized that it was his own. He felt a warm liquid, like blood, spilling on his knee, heard the rattle of the coffee cup on the saucer, and then his whole body seemed to float off into space.

It seemed as though he were in a cave on a high hill. Through the cracks in the roof of the cave light filtered in, but he could not see any outer space through the cracks, as though the light had taken liquid form and were flowing through the crevices. He could hear voices, too, above him, but he couldn't understand any of the words; they seemed to be speaking in a foreign language or were just far enough away to make them unintelligible. But they were talking about him; he knew that. He tried to hear what they were saying, and felt a qualm of disgust with himself for eavesdropping. But no, he was disgusted because he was lying here, entirely naked, unable to move, while people outside were pitying him for being sick. He wondered why the rocks he was lying on didn't hurt his back, and realized that he was lying on air, six inches above the floor of the cave. How nice, he thought, and a wave of sensuality enveloped him. Then the voices floated off in the distance and he saw Eileen's face protrude itself through one of the cracks in the roof of the cave. The light pouring through the crack made a halo around her head. He tried to move his hand to cover up his nakedness, but his hand

seemed to be weighted down with stones. He gazed at her face and felt overwhelmingly that he loved her. She winked at him lasciviously, and her lips pursed as though she were kissing him. With sudden logic he realized that he was foolish to love her; her neck must be terribly long and deformed to allow her to thrust her head through the crack. A hand appeared through the crack, groping, with long sinewy fingers. The hand was black, and the fingernails were painted a dark red. Yet he knew that it was Cleone's. Eileen tried fiercely to bite it, but the fingers wriggled upward like a snake and gouged deeply into the coal black eyes. There was a terrible scream. He heard himself shout in a sobbing voice, "You bastard, you dirty bastard." A blinding light shot through the cave, blinding him.

He woke up. His mother was standing over him; he was in his bed, and the lights were on.

"Are you all right, Eric, dear?" his mother asked. She was almost crying with anxiety.

He smiled weakly. "Yes," he said. "Will you turn the light off? It hurts my eyes."

Mrs. Tobin turned off the light.

"Do you want anything, dear?"

He shook his head. "No, I'll just sleep. Will you shut the door when you go out?"

His mother bent over and kissed him. He caught a glimpse of someone standing in the doorway as his mother went out. It was Mrs. Comfort.



"Can I do anything?" she asked.

"No, Natalie. He just needs some sleep. He was over-tired, the train ride and all that...." The door closed.

He fell asleep wondering whether he had meant Cleone or Eileen when he had shouted bastard in his dream.



IV

Eric spent Monday in bed, sleeping heavily until late in the morning and then feeling too weak and listless to get up. He decided not to keep his appointment with Albert, but to visit him the next day.

His mother brought him his meals, studying him anxiously but saying very little, for which he was thankful.

In the afternoon Aunt Myra and Cleone came up to see him, talked for a little while and left, evidently afraid of tiring him. He found that he liked his aunt, although he was a little afraid of her blunt, forthright manner. And his heart went out to his cousin, who seemed very gentle and kind and yet not too softly effeminate. She was quick and graceful in her movements, with a slender, athletic figure, and expressive gray eyes that seemed to make her rather thin face alive and lovely.

But he felt somewhat constrained in their presence because he felt that they were watching him, apprehensively, and perhaps pitying him. And he could not tell what they were thinking although both seemed perfectly candid and pleasant. He was relieved when they left.

Then, too, naturally, he felt ashamed of having collapsed, of having lost control. And just when he should have been on his best behavior, trying to make a favorable impression. He

should have been on his guard -- he would have to be in the future, at least until he was thoroughly rested and strong enough to stand the strain of having people near him and of being sociable. But he had been tired; the long train trip, the first he'd had in three years, had been too much for him; and the excitement of coming home, of seeing his mother and his aunt and cousin -- it had been too much for one day.

The next day he leaped out of bed refreshed and energetic. The clock on the bureau said five minutes of nine, and he wanted to spend the morning looking around the grounds, the garden, the orchard, and all that had once been so familiar -- and then in the afternoon he must visit Albert Comfort. While he was washing and dressing he decided not to go after all. What could he say to Albert? What would there be to talk about? How would he excuse himself for not coming yesterday? And maybe by now Albert regretted having asked him. Then he changed his mind again. Albert might feel hurt if he didn't come, might feel that it was a personal affront. He seemed to be rather sensitive and easily offended.

Nobody was in the living room or the dining room when he went down. He went into the kitchen. Mrs. Comfort greeted him coolly.

"I'll call your mother," she said. "She wanted me to call her when you got up."

She put some breakfast on the kitchen table for him and went out the back door into the yard. Eric saw her going across

the yard toward the garden. He wondered if she knew - but probably she had helped to carry him upstairs. He sat down and began to eat. He felt almost famished.

Soon he heard voices at the back door, and Mrs. Comfort and his mother came in.

"Good morning, Eric," his mother said cheerfully. "Did you sleep well?"

Evidently she had made up her mind not to mention his illness..

"I've been looking at my flower beds.. The frost is almost out of the ground. Soon be time to put the bulbs back in."

She was scanning him carefully as she chattered.

"How do you feel?" she asked, trying to make her voice casual, trying not to appear worried.

"Oh, fine, Mother. I had a good rest, and.... I guess that's what I needed."

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Have you any plans for today, or are you just going to rest up?"

"I have to... I promised to go see a friend of mine in... in town this afternoon."

His mother looked at him anxiously.

"Don't you think you ought to rest today?"

He smiled at her and shook his head. She turned helplessly to Mrs. Comfort.

"What do you think, Natalie, shouldn't he rest?"

Mrs. Comfort turned from the stove, where she was stirring something in a saucepan.

"Yes, rest," she said. "Rest is a good thing." She gave him a searching look, her face expressionless, and turned back to the stove.

Eric blushed without knowing why. He was convinced that Natalie had heard them talking night before last about Albert and Eileen and he tried to remember precisely what had been said.

"Is it important, Eric?" his mother asked timidly.

"I got acquainted with the conductor on the train, and he asked me to give a message to his brother, Mr. Ayres, the grocery man."

"Oh, is that all."

He got up. He was angry with his deceit and yet was unwilling for some reason to tell the truth.

"Where is Aunt Myra?" he asked.

"She went down town to do some shopping."

"And Cleone?"

"Went hiking. She's looking for robins. Why don't you come out and look at the garden?"

He spent the rest of the morning wandering around the grounds of his home, and this activity made him feel better.

That afternoon Eric walked slowly down the driveway with his hat and overcoat on. The ground was wet and soft, and he had forgotten his rubbers. The evergreens along the drive

looked green and fresh. Under some of them, near the trunk, he could see little patches of dirty snow and ice, but otherwise there were no signs of winter. Here he met Will Ashley, the postman, and much to his surprise received the letter from Eileen. It was a short note, and he read it over twice.

"Eric Tobin, it said, Don't believe everytning my brother told you. He was in a bad mood. I'm not quite as bad as he says - but almost. I want to see you. I am at home nearly every night; you know where we live. Don't be afraid - I have no designs on you."

Eileen Comfort

Eric found himself smiling at the note as he put it in his pocket, but it puzzled him too. He decided that she had written it on the spur of the moment and was probably sorry for it now. He continued on his way, turning left at the end of the drive and walking down the main road toward town. The macadam road was in bad condition, with many chuck-holes and frost heaves that told of a hard winter. In the ditches beside the road, there was a slight trickle of water, but there was no ice. The sun was bright and warm, and he guessed that the temperature had risen almost twenty degrees since yesterday afternoon when he had felt so cold in the Fatland station. The wind had died away.

Going by the cemetery, half way between his home and town, he was tempted to stop in and count the new tombstones, ones that had been added since he left, but looking at his watch he changed his mind. It was quarter of three, and he still

had to walk all the way to the other side of town. There were tombstones in there, he reflected, that had been there since 1750; Keton was certainly an old town. His heart warmed with affection for the old place, the first feeling of hominess he'd had since he arrived.

On a sudden impulse he stopped into Ayre's grocery store as he was going through town. Mr. Ayres was waiting on a customer, and Eric waited at the front of the store, looking at the display of vegetables and cans, until he was through.

"And what can I do for you this morning?" Mr. Ayres said.

The resemblance to his brother was striking. He was short, stocky, and red-faced, but he looked younger and somehow cleaner and fresher.

"Not very much," said Eric. "My name is Eric Tobin. You probably know my mother; she does her shopping here."

"Of course I do. And I know you, too." He spoke rapidly, with a husky asthmatic wheeze. Eric had difficulty understanding what he said. "You been away, haven't you?"

Eric smiled. "Yes, for some time now. I got back yesterday."

"Well, the old place hasn't changed much, has it. Lessee, you been gone for three or four years, haven't you, or longer?"

"Six years."

"Time flies," Mr. Ayres wheezed, and coughed in the back of his hand.

"When I was coming in on the train yesterday, I met your brother, and he wanted to be reminded to you."

"You did, hey. Old Norrie? The son of a gun goes through here every day, can y' imagine that? And I never see him. Fat as ever I suppose."

"He's pretty fat."

"Fat but not pretty, I guess." Mr. Ayres laughed and coughed at the same time. A woman with a large paper shopping bag came in. "Well, 'Mawful glad you stopped in. Good to hear about the folks once in a while."

Eric walked on through town, past the postoffice, up the short hill to the congregational church, and turned left on the road that led to the station. He walked now with his head down, without noticing anything, deep in thought. He was puzzling over what his mother had hinted about Eileen and Albert and what his aunt had stated so bluntly. Could it be true? Was she really bad, as bad as that? She didn't look it, and yet there was something about her face that was coarse, a coarseness that revealed itself only occasionally. Outside of that, he thought, she was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen. And then, the nasty things that her brother had said about her. Would he be lying, trying deliberately to blacken her character in his eyes? Why should he?

Eric passed the station and turned down the road leading through the underpass about a quarter of a mile from the Comfort's house.

As for Albert, Eric had guessed that he was radical from some of the things he had said on the train, but he still doubted that he was a communist. They were certainly a queer

family, the mother hardly ever going home, the sister and brother quarreling, and perhaps hating each other, and yet living together, and both probably hating their mother. This last Eric knew from the past. Ever since he had started college six years before, Mrs. Comfort had been spending all of the day and night with his mother, because, as she said, she preferred this place to her home. What her feelings for her children were, Eric did not know.

The Comfort home seemed to be in fairly good condition, and Eric guessed that Albert spent some of his time repairing it. He knocked on the door. There was the sound of footsteps from somewhere upstairs and then the clip-clop of someone coming down. It sounded more like a woman than a man, or else Albert was wearing leather heeled shoes. The door opened and Albert stood before him. He was in his bathrobe, or dressing gown, it was hard to tell which, made of some kind of material resembling felt, black with a red collar and red cuffs. His black hair was tangled and his eyes were sleepy. His pajama pants showed at the bottom of his robe, and his bare feet were stuck into a pair of rundown patent leather slippers. Dressed so, he seemed to Eric bigger and stronger than he had appeared yesterday, and more disagreeable.

"Come on in," he said in a surly voice. "Been expecting you since yesterday."

"I couldn't come," Eric answered. "I was sick."

The house smelled musty and in need of a good airing, and it was colder inside than out.

"Come on into the kitchen where it's warm."

The living room was on the left of the hall, as it was in Eric's home. He noticed that the door on the right of the hall was closed, and guessed that it was a two-family house. Albert led him through the living room into the kitchen. There was a fire burning in a large coal range, and a blackened kettle was steaming and singing near the front of the range. Albert set it farther back on the stove near a coffee percolator which occasionally plopped a bubble of coffee up into the glass cover.

"Sit down there." Albert motioned to a large armchair, comfortable looking but snabby, in a corner of the room between a window and the stove. Eric sat down.

"Have some coffee? This is my breakfast. I work nights and sleep mornings."

"No thanks," Eric answered.

Albert went to the sink and washed his hands and face. He ran his wet fingers through his hair, pulled a comb out of the pocket of his robe, and combed his hair carefully and thoroughly, running the fingers of his left hand after the comb in a gentle caressing manner. Then he dried his face and hands on a dirty towel hanging beside the sink.

"I overslept," he said, with an obvious effort to make his voice sound pleasant.

Eric noticed a cereal dish and a cup and saucer on the table. Both had been used, and there were toast crumbs and a knife with a little wad of butter on the end of it. Eric

looked for the spoon and couldn't find it, wondering if Eileen had eaten with her knife. Albert picked a spoon up off the floor and threw it into the sink. He took the dirty things off the table and wiped it off with a dishcloth. Then he washed the cup and saucer and the spoon, dried them, and set them on the table for himself. Eric tried to think of something to say, and couldn't; the silence was getting oppressive, but Albert seemed oblivious to the fact that he had a guest.. From somewhere in the other side of the house Eric heard the sound of clothes being rubbed on an old fashioned scrubbing board.

"Well, what do you think of this screwy family?" He had poured himself a cup of coffee, and was stirring it, although he had added neither sugar nor milk.

Albert asked it very seriously, as though it were a weighty question and much depended on Eric's answer. Eric was startled.

Then without waiting for an answer, Albert suddenly jumped up and disappeared into the pantry, which opened on the opposite side of the room from which Eric was sitting. He returned with his finger thrust through the hole in two crullers, waving them like a banner.

"Have a doughnut," he shouted gaily.

Eric shook his head, and Albert sat down.

"Damn good," he said, biting one off in the middle. He started to raise his coffee cup to his lips and in the middle of the motion stopped, the cup half-way to his lips..

Eric shifted uneasily in his chair.

"I'd rather not," he said.

Albert glared at him, his eyes full of hate. He gave a short spiteful laugh.

He said, "That means you don't think much of it, hey?"

"Well, I... I think it could be a fine... family, only it's not a.....a family."

Albert looked at him sharply and continued eating. Eric struggled for better words to express himself. He wanted to give an earnest answer, and yet he didn't want to hurt the other's feelings.

"You don't seem to have much family life."

Albert continued eating moodily. He didn't answer.

"Sort of like being related without.... without having any of the... feeling that goes with the relationship."

Albert finished the cruller he was eating and drank the rest of his coffee. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, offered one to Eric, who refused, and lit one. Flipping the match into the sink, he inhaled deeply and sat back in his chair. He rested one slippered foot on the silver rim that ran around the stove.

"Listen," he said. "You're so close to being right, that it's not even funny."

His attitude had completely changed. He was thoughtful now, unprejudiced and almost friendly.

"Sure you won't have a cup of coffee?"

Eric shook his head.

"Makes you feel a lot better. More relaxed. Peaceful."

He must have been thinking of Eric's mood as running parallel to his own. He was faced sidewise to Eric and was studying the coffee pot as the brown liquid plopped up every once in a while into the percolator top and subsided slowly like muddy water or dark maple syrup.

"Does my mother know you came down here?"

"No," Eric said. "I don't think so. Maybe she suspects, though."

"Why? Did you tell her you met me on the train?"

"I told my mother, and maybe she heard me."

Albert grunted. He got up from his chair. "Wait a minute," he said. "I've got to go to the bathroom. You wait here; I'll be right back."

He went into the dining room, and Eric heard him going upstairs. An upstairs door slammed, and a key turned in the lock.

Eric had an impulse to get up and leave. He hadn't felt comfortable since he entered the house, and Albert seemed to be at no pains to be sociable. The house itself was oppressive and gloomy, or at least this part of it; the light was poor, the air was bad, and there was something "homeless" about it, like an empty tenement. The water pipes running across the ceiling of the kitchen, near the sink, dripped water which had condensed on their surface. The smell of stale coffee combined with the heat of the range and the steam-drenched air made him feel sick to his stomach. Eric was convinced that he ought to leave; it was almost like a warning, an uneasy premonition, that

this was the point at which he should turn back and retrace his steps, take another road before it was too late. This very moment was his life, and he held it in his hand to do with it what he would. He could wait the moment out, and then his life would slip from his grip and begin to lead him, where he did not know. Or he could act now, in the moment, and then he would still retain his grip on his life until another moment such as this came along.

He laughed at himself for thinking so seriously. After all, every moment was like this, a crisis, and if you didn't wait it out you would zigzag down the road like a drunken sailor. He heard Albert flush the toilet.

And there was something interesting about Albert, something attractive that drew him strongly, like a communion of thought and feeling. Eric felt that he knew him intimately, although he had really known nothing about Albert until he met him at the station. And at the same time something repulsive, not a coarseness, but a hardness, as though there was an integral part of his nature that was like a diamond, impenetrable and entirely his own.

Albert entered the kitchen. He had discarded his slippers and had come down the stairs in his bare feet. He stood for several seconds in the doorway studying Eric.

"You know," he said, giving Eric a sly wink, as though there were a secret between them, "I had a queer feeling up there that you might not be here when I came down."

Eric looked at him thoughtfully, and said, "I was thinking

of leaving."

"Well, it's not too late. You can go now if you want."

He turned sidewise in the doorway, making room for Eric to go out..

"Why should I leave?"

"Why?"

"Yes."

"Any number of reasons. Maybe you don't like this sort of thing." He waved his hand to indicate the room they were in. "This.....dump. Maybe it doesn't appeal to your delicate sense of balance." He said it sarcastically. "You're used to such finer things.. And then, of course, a person in your condition probably has to be careful about letting himself in to new situations, especially if he doesn't know what the outcome may be."

Eric shifted uneasily in his chair, wondering how far he would persist in his meanness.

"And perhaps you were thinking pretty strongly that you'd better not get any better acquainted with a fellow like me; I haven't got many qualities to recommend me as a friend."

He waited for some time, apparently expecting an answer. But Eric remained silent, his head bent as though he were dozing.

Very casually but with careful distinctness Albert went on. "But there's always the chance that if you wait here long enough, or come often enough, --- only a chance, mind you -- that you might see my sister."

"I came to see you," Eric said quietly.

After a moment, Albert's clouded face cleared. He laughed derisively.

"I doubt that," he said. "But let it pass."

He walked over to Eric, pulled a chair away from the table, and sat down facing him, directly in front of him. He tucked his bare feet behind the legs of the chair. Leaning forward, he tapped Eric earnestly on the knee.

"Listen," he said. "I want to tell you something."

Eric looked up at him and then down again. Albert's gaze was so painfully intense that it was hard to look into his eyes.

"Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"I want you to be my friend."

Eric wriggled with embarrassment, trying not to look at him.

"Now look," Albert said, sounding like a slightly exasperated school teacher, "you don't have to be embarrassed. I know this isn't the way friendships usually start, but I can't be bothered going through all the preliminaries, building up and building up like a damned courtship, and nothing ever being said about friendship. Let's be blunt about it. You see, I'm doing this for selfish reasons but also because I... like you, but selfish, too... maybe mostly that. You don't jar on me; you're different from me, and so we'll get along. And you understand more than the average person, about people;

I could see that -- in spite of your..... well, skip it. You're intelligent, but most of all you're... imaginative... intuition-al.. Maybe you're psychic, I don't know."

"I haven't any friends," he added, and bristled a little.. "By choice. People don't appeal to me."

He pulled his hand away from Eric's knee and sat back in his straight-backed chair. There was a long silence; Eric struggled painfully with his thoughts. Albert folded his arms across his chest and watched the other moodily, waiting.

Suddenly Eric looked up. There was a look of quiet simplicity on his face, and he smiled.

"I think you need a friend," he said. "And I... I need one too."

"You don't have to accept, you know," said Albert, showing a trace of surliness again. "I'm not forcing you into anything. You're making the choice."

Eric spoke with sincerity and conviction. "I think it's generous of you to offer your friendship. I don't deserve it... you're a fine person. But you're troubled, and I need companionship. Maybe we can help each other."

Albert leaped up delightedly, rubbing his hands together and chuckling. "Just right," he said. "That's exactly right. I'm troubled and you need companionship. How true! About me, especially." He took a turn around the table, bubbling over with delight, and stood again in front of Eric. He held out his right hand and Eric clasped it. "Friends," said Albert.

In sheer exuberation he pulled Eric out of his seat, put his arm around Eric's waist and pulled him around the table, pushing chairs out of the way with his right hand to make room for them to pass abreast. He was laughing all the time, until Eric too was forced to laugh. They stood facing each other near the stove, looking into each other's face and laughing. They shook hands again and again, laughing.

V

Eric thought of his visit later as, on the whole, a very pleasant two hours. After the novelty of the situation had worn off, the two sat down in the kitchen together and talked; that is, Albert did most of the talking, while Eric, with unassuming but eager attention, listened to his newly-acquired friend.

Albert told him much about himself. He had been working for the past two years, every night except Sundays from six until twelve, in the local printing office. Officially he was a re-write man, rewriting the stories that were to appear in the weekly newspaper, the Keton Times Press, but he did many odd jobs such as writing advertisements that were to go into the paper, assisting with the makeup, and even helping to set type. He liked the work, as he was a fluent, though untrained, writer, and he wanted to continue with it until he had enough training to work for a bigger paper. Unfortunately, and he made no bones at revealing this to Eric, his personality didn't jibe well with the people he was working with, and he was afraid this shortcoming would handicap him wherever he had to work with others.

Only once did he mention Eileen, and then it was to tell Eric that she earned more money than he did, working for Tom Burton, Keton's best lawyer, a scoundrelly old rascal of about

sixty-four. "He'd skin you out of your eye-teeth if you'd let him," Albert said. "But he treats Eileen well.

"He's got a gold tooth in the front of his mouth, which is the only one he lets you see when he smiles," he added irrelevantly. "Puckers his lips up like a rabbit."

Eric was strengthened in the impression which he had gatnered on first seeing his new friend that he was fearfully proud, almost morbidly so. And along with that he was exceptionally intelligent. With normal family ties, he might have been an equable, stable, likeable individual. But his family background was unusual, even abnormal, and its effect on his personality was evident. He wanted desperately, as Eric guessed, to have something to be proud of, although this longing was under the surface, so to speak, subconscious, and he was hardly aware of it himself. He wanted something that he could flourish in the face of a disbelieving world, something that was actual and commanding of respect, that would tide him over until he could make his own mark, a rock of security under his feet from which he could launch himself into his own individual career. But he had nothing. He was fighting alone, with no reserves, no fort to retreat to, no support from without, nothing but his own strength. And so naturally he was sensitive to every thrust, actual or imaginary, against him or in his direction.

His own strength, however, was considerable.

Much of this Eric knew intuitively, and much he was to learn later. He had to guess, for Albert said nothing about his

own inner conflicts, although he talked freely about the objective events of his life. Eric guessed too that his friend had an almost obsessional regard for respectability, that is, for living a respectable existence. He had, perhaps, established this as a prop; this was to be his support, his pride; this was to speak for him against the world until he could speak for himself. And here, Eric thought, lay the secret of the conflict between brother and sister -- but it was not until later that Eric formed this opinion, and still later was forced to modify it somewhat..

For the time being he listened with a great deal of interest to what Albert revealed of his life. He'd had some interesting experiences, and he told of them unreservedly, in a careless, half-mocking manner that left Eric in doubt as to how much was true and how much was extemporaneous fiction fabricated to throw the light of romance over the actual events.

Albert had graduated from high school at nineteen, and after three months of fruitless searching for a job had joined the Navy. He had been influenced in this decision by Keton's Methodist minister, who knew a retired naval captain and who had himself, before experiencing the call of the clerical life, been very much enamoured of the sea. In spite of some misgivings, Albert, driven by desperation and drawn by the minister's inspirational encomiums of the naval life -- which were, by the way, based on nothing more substantial than imagination -- and completely disgusted with the emptiness of his life at home, enlisted in the hospital corps of the

United States Navy.

He had wanted to join the aviation division, but since there were no vacancies in that branch he took the next best thing, with an obscure hope of working his way up in the ranks to become a doctor. This hope was short-lived, for the enlisted man, as he put it, had as much chance of rising from the ranks as a snowball in hell.

"He's dead now," he said, speaking of the minister. "The son of a bitch."

"They sent me to a training camp for four months near Norfolk, Virginia. The first three weeks are lovely. Preliminaries. They put you in -- what do you call it -- something like incubation. A few bunkhouses, offices, and a guard-house, all surrounded by an eight-foot wire fence with three strands of barbed wire slanted inward on the top of it. That's so the homesick babies can't pack up and leave without giving Uncle Sam a fair trial. You get tested for this and tested for that. You get inoculated. You get your teeth fixed, your eyes examined, and your head shaved. You get a taste of Navy discipline; there's a sergeant-at-arms chosen from your own number, and he tells you what to do, like scrubbing out the bunkhouse, cleaning up the yard, lining up for inspection, all that sort of shit. Then you drill twice a day, morning and afternoon, hot as hell, too."

He leaped up from his chair and shouldered an imaginary gun. "Shoulder-----ARMS!" He went through the motions. "Present-----ARMS!" He collapsed again in his chair. "Until

you're so goddam sick of it all that you'd like to spit in the sergeant's face and go over the fence. Do you know what that means, 'go over the fence'? Beat it. To hell with everything. Desert.

"Some guys do it, too. They can't stand it. You're a fugitive from the government. You lose your citizenship. You're a man without a country. But they do it; they just can't take it.

"Three weeks of that with no time off, seven days a week. You're in quarantine; you can't go outside the gate. You get homesick. You get homesick. Even for a place like this." He waved his hand, staring unbelievably around the messy kitchen.

"Then they sent us -- there were about forty of us -- to the Norfolk hospital school for three months of training. We raised hell. We all did. They gave us every weekend off, Saturday afternoon and Sunday, back Sunday night at twelve. It was like heaven. We went to classes all day and studied at night and planned how we could get the most out of a few dollars on the following weekend."

Eric wondered if he'd had any friends, and Albert seemed to read his thoughts.

"They were all abnormal, you know. Like me. Homesick. Thrown into a new life, and they all hated it, at first at least. And we got along pretty well together, all being in the same fix. But they studied, too. If you got high enough marks you could choose whether you should go to sea or work in

some naval hospital on land, and the ten highest students could choose the hospital they were to work in. I was ninth. I chose the Boston hospital so I could be near home.

"One fellow there in Norfolk with us was sort of a veteran. He'd been in for six months, gone through his training, three weeks quarantine and three months school, and failed, or committed some misdemeanor, I don't know which; but anyway they made him do it over again, quarantine and everything. He knew the ropes. He told us what we could get away with and what not, and he told us how to find all the speakeasies in Norfolk."

He paused and looked at Eric narrowly to see what effect his words would have. Eric's face was pale and his eyes were calm, but he was listening attentively.

Albert continued breezily. He seemed now to be bent on shocking Eric into some expression of distaste or disgust.

"This fellow got a disease -- you know -- two weeks before we graduated. He made the mistake of going to the sick-bay for treatment, and they put him to bed and wouldn't let him graduate with the class. So he had to spend another four months in training. Other guys got it too, a couple of them, but they kept it hidden until after they graduated."

He interrupted himself. "You're bored. I can see that. Let's talk about something else."

Eric protested. "No, I'm not. I'm... interested. I... know something about... the world. I haven't led a completely sheltered life." He smiled candidly. The truth was that Eric

wondered how far Albert had entered into the existence that he was describing, and he was trying to reconcile the proud, sensitive appearance of the man before him with the coarseness that he had suggested as being part of his experience.

Albert resumed. "Well, as far as Norfolk is concerned, there isn't much more to it. My sister wasn't working then, and I was sending part of my money home. We got thirty-six dollars a month, with all our keep; a seaman only gets twenty-one. So, you see I didn't have much to go on. And anyway I got sort of disgusted with that sort of thing. The second month I was there I went the rounds with this fellow I was telling you about -- I can't even remember his name; Vic, I think we called him -- We walked around the nigger section first. Some of the streets were so bad that they wouldn't let the sailors go on them; they were guarded by the shore patrol. But the others were bad enough. Nigger women would lean out the window and say, 'Hi yuh, sailor, right this way. Two bits, sailor. All night fuh fo' bits.' We didn't go in. They had all sorts of diseases. Nobody went in unless he was drunk. They cussed us after we'd passed.

"We went down to another section of town, the sailors' section. Near the waterfront. It smelled clammy. There was another fellow with us. He was short and chubby, had a fat, pink face like a baby; he wanted to go into one of the houses. His face was all lighted up, flushed, you know, with anticipation, and he kept laughing in a silly way at the slightest possible excuse. He was nervous, too, and timid. He kept

patting the breast pocket of his suit where he had put his little tube of prophylactic which the Navy supplied and advised us to carry with us.

"Well, we finally went into one of the places. There wasn't any trouble getting in. We went through a hall, up a flight of stairs, and knocked on the door. Somebody opened the door a crack, saw the uniforms, and let us in.

"We took a table and ordered some beer. They were serving bootleg beer, etherized, nasty but powerful. Did you ever drink etherized beer? Well, if you like the taste of beer, it's louzy; if you want to get drunk, great."

Albert paused and lit a cigarette. In spite of his careless manner of speaking, the recital was apparently affecting him. His face was gloomy and drawn, and his eyes seemed to be looking at some distant object. Eric noticed that the hand in which he held his cigarette was shaking slightly. From the other side of the house the sound of clothes being scrubbed reached Eric's ears again, and from somewhere in the partitions in back of the stove a rat could be heard gnawing on wood.

"The fat fellow who was with us kept rubbering around the room at the women and laughing in his silly way. There were only a few other men there, all sailors, and four or five women. One of the women seemed to be the boss; she was big and fat and past middle age, and she stood in the doorway of the kitchen, where they kept the beer, sometimes talking with one of the other girls, but most of the time just watching.

She went to the door whenever there was a knock.

"They were afraid there was going to be a raid -- the police had been raiding other places during the week -- and the girls were all nervous. They jumped at the slightest sound from outside. There were five of them in the room, not counting the Madam; two were sitting at the tables with the other men, two were wandering around the room, giving us the eye, and one was sitting all alone at a table in a corner near the only window in the place looking at her fingers and paying no attention to anything that was going on. It was all new to me; I think it was to the fat guy; but Vic, the 'veteran' I was telling you about, seemed to be right at home. He called the girls by name, talked with them, and kept looking around as though someone were missing. Finally he asked where so-and-so was.

'In there,' one of the girls says, pointing to a closed door at one end of the room.

'Phooie,' says Vic, 'guess I'm late.'

'We're still around, sailor,' and everybody laughs as though it was the funniest joke of the evening. The girl sitting alone at the table looks up, catches Vic's eye, and doesn't crack a smile. Vic gets interested.

"The fat boy reaches out and pulls one of the girls down on his lap while she's laughing. She must be about thirty, dirty blond hair, plump, pale and washed out. She's wearing a slip and a pair of shoes. The other one looks at me for a long time and then walks away. She talks with the Madam and

keeps looking at me.

"Fatty can't make up his mind. He's happy, he's eager, but he's afraid. The girl drinks the beer in his glass and pours out some more. Fatty drinks, motions for another bottle.

'Who's that?' Vic says, motioning toward the girl at the table. 'Something new.'

Fatty's girl laughs, really amused.

'That's a good one,' she says. 'New? Hey, Mary, he thinks you're new!' She shouts at the other one, who doesn't look up. 'She was here when I came.'

'When was that,' says Fatty, 'B.C.?' He lets out his silly cackle.

She pinches his cheek, and two white spots show up and stay there for a long time. 'Last year,' she says. 'Three months ago she left to get married. Now she's back.' She gulps down more beer, and Fatty finishes the bottle, yells for some more. He fumbles at her with his hand. She hugs him and whispers in his ear.

The Madam looks at Vic and then at the girl in the corner. She goes over and talks to her. The girl nods her head but doesn't look up. Madam goes back to the kitchen door.

Somebody laughs at the other table looking at Fatty. 'It won't be long now.' And they all laugh.

'I'm in the mood tonight,' Fatty's girl says. She begins to sing in a high voice, 'I'm in the mood for love - simply because you're near me ----'

Fatty has stopped laughing. He's thinking seriously.

Every once in a while his hand goes to his breast pocket, feeling the tube of prophylactic.

'What you got there,' the girl says, feeling his breast. She knows.

Fatty gives a sickly grin. 'Come on,' he says.

They get up and go into one of the rooms.

Vic looks at the girl in the corner. She looks at him. He gets up, and she gets up. They come together in the middle of the room. Kiss without a word. They go together toward another room. She hangs back as they're going in.

'Knock on the door if the cops come,' she screams. 'I don't want to get caught on my first night back.'

Everybody laughs except the Madam. She brings me a bottle of beer.

'Just drinkin', sailor?' she says.

'Yeah.'

I pay her for the beer. In about six minutes Fatty walks out of the room he was in; he looks kind of sick. He rushes out of the hall to the bathroom, fumbling for the tube of prophylactic. There's a big red splotch on his neck, where she'd bitten him.

Pretty soon he comes back. His face is pale, and he looks sick.. He sits down.

'Let's go,' he mumbles. 'Let's get out of here.'

Fatty's girl comes out of the room, walks over to the Madam. They talk. They both look at me. Fatty's girl smiles invitingly. I shake my head.

'Let's go,' says Fatty.

'Wait for Vic.'

After awhile Vic comes out. He comes up to the table.

'Come on.. Let's shove off,' says Vic. 'I didn't bring anything with me.'

'Better get some Argyrol when you get back.'

'Yeah, when I get back.'

Fatty's hand goes to his breast pocket, but it's empty now.

'Let's get some gin,' Vic says.

'I'm goin' home,' Fatty says.

'So long.'

He leaves. We stop in a speakeasy and get a quart of gin. Then we go to another house. We order a pitcher of beer, drink a couple of glasses, and then we sneak a glassful of gin into the beer and snake it up. After a little while the girls don't bother us any more. We just want to drink.

We get tired of that place and go to another one. The girls are all dressed up like sailors, in white sailor suits.. They're pretty from a distance. This is more of a high-class joint. Everybody is shouting, laughing, drinking, dancing. There was a raid last night, so they don't have to worry for a couple of more weeks. A girl takes off her sailor jumper, dances on one of the tables; she's slightly drunk; nothing on but pants and high-heeled shoes. The Madam, an aristocrat, gets sore, walks over to give the girl hell.

'No undressing in this joint,' she yells. 'Put your louzy shirt back on.'

The girl sobers up. She's frightened. Wraps her jumper around her. A sailor grabs her and pulls her upstairs. You have to go upstairs for a room in this place. Ritzy. We move on to another one.

When I wake up in the morning, I'm lying on a bench in a park. Vic is propped up against a tree beside me. As soon as I get up I fall flat on the ground. I crawl behind a bush and puke for ten minutes straight. Then I wake Vic up.

'Did you get the Argyrol?'

'Hell, no,' he says.

It's a bright, balmy morning. Sunday. Ten o'clock. We walk back to the school and plop into bed.

That was Norfolk."

Albert got up and walked around the room restlessly. He turned the water on in the sink, musing, and turned it off again. He shifted the kettle back over the fire, and it immediately began to sing.

"I'm not talked out yet," he said.

Eric looked at him pityingly. He felt disgusted in spite of his desire to like his friend.

Albert brushed the top of the table with his hand and then sat on the table, facing Eric, his feet dangling. "That was a hell of a life," he said, "and Boston was just as bad."

Albert Comfort, talking to Eric of odds and ends, looked back on a piece of his life that was still vivid in his memory.

In the Boston Naval Hospital he had been put on ward duty, in Ward Fl, a semi-surgical ward, devoted to eye-ear-nose-and-throat operations. A nurse, a woman of about thirty-eight, was in charge of the ward, and there were three attendants besides Albert.

The work was fairly easy. He had to sweep floors, make beds, empty bed-pans, feed and take care of the patients. He worked from seven-thirty in the morning until nine at night on one day, and from seven-thirty until three on the alternate day. He was off every other Sunday. Eric gathered that he felt degraded and disgusted by the type of work he had to do. And he had a hard time making friends.

He slept in a dormitory, a one-story white-washed brick building, long and narrow, which housed forty men. Albert was the first new man to come in to the hospital in about eight months, and he found it hard to get acquainted with the routine and with the other sailors. He became more and more morose, speaking very little, lying on his bed and reading whenever he had time off. During the first year he spent his time almost exclusively within the gates of the reservation, becoming more and more embittered with the world in general and with his lot in particular.

He reached a point where he felt that he could stand no more, and with desperate hope he tendered an application for a special order discharge. After three months of anxious waiting and hoping, it came back, refused.

In the meantime, however, two things had happened to him:

he had made a friend and had been shifted to a new job.

The friend's name was Janis, Bill Janis, and he was an assistant in the hospital dispensary. He was a quiet chap, studious, handsome, and very pleasant. They had slept together in the same dormitory without knowing each other. They got to talking one evening while they were reading, lying on their beds, the only two men in the dormitory. Bill had been in the Navy about six months longer than Albert; he was saving money and was planning to go to college as soon as his enlistment was up. In the meantime he had a good job, good food, a place to sleep, and on the whole was having a good time.

"How do you do it," Albert asked.

"As far as jobs are concerned, there are plenty of good ones around this hospital. You have to keep your eye out, and when you hear that one's going to be vacant make your application. There's one fellow leaving now, over in the X-ray room; going to sea. You might be able to get that one if you can typewrite."

Albert tried for the job and got it. It was really a good job. Soft. He was secretary to an X-ray doctor, Doctor Sanderson, Lieutenant-Commander. Albert sat by while he studied his X-ray slides and dictated his findings. After the readings were done, Albert typed the reports and distributed them to the various wards concerned. He went to work at eight in the morning and was finished every day at four. He had every weekend off, Saturday afternoons and Sundays.

When finally he was refused a special order discharge, he

felt somewhat reconciled to finishing out his enlistment. His new work was pleasanter and his pride suffered less.

And he began going out at night with Bill. His new friend was able to get all the liquor he wanted from the dispensary, good whiskey, and, in a pinch, straight alcohol. Their only difficulty was in getting it off the reservation; they had to pass through a guard house where a Marine was always on duty. The guard, however, very seldom searched anyone going out, unless his suspicions were aroused. It was easy to tie a bottle to one's ankle, where the baggy flapping pants of their uniforms effectually hid it.

They would go to a speakeasy, any one of a number near the Waterfront in Boston, order a pitcher of beer, and add some straight alcohol. Or if they had whiskey, they would drink that out of the bottle and use the beer as a chaser. Then they would talk and drink until after midnight.

One night things weren't going so well. They had come to the speakeasy late; Bill had been called down for allowing the dispensary to get dirty, and he had gone back after supper to clean it up. And he hadn't dared to get any whiskey or alcohol because the doctor, head of the dispensary, seemed to be checking up. Bill made light of the whole affair.

"They'll forget it in a day or two," he said, "and then things will get back to normal."

But nevertheless the incident had a sobering effect, and he looked glum.

The speakeasy, too, was in the doldrums. They were

expecting the police. Everything was hushed. People talked in whispers. The boss, a dapper little man with an excessively tailored suit, strutted around nervously, keeping his eye on everything, warning the noise makers. "They'll come in and go out," he said, "providing they don't see no hell being raised."

"Ain't nothin' sacred," somebody cracked; but nobody laughed.

Drinking was heavier than usual. People were trying to build up their spirits against the deadly pall on the outside. Silently and joylessly they were getting drunk.

A fat, young-looking girl in a black dress and a black hat suddenly passed out, keeled over sidewise from her chair and hit the floor with a startling thud. The sailor who was with her looked down at her stupidly with a sickly grin. The boss shuffled up rapidly, like a prize-fighter.

"Get her out of here," he hissed. "Get her to hell out of here. They'll close us up sure if they see that."

There were eight or ten sailors in the place, but none of them offered to help. The girls with them were for the most part pick-ups, and they didn't feel particularly concerned about seeing another fellow's pick-up pass out.

"Put her in the back room," someone yelled.

"Not tonight," said the boss. "They'll look there sure."

The sailor stooped and lifted her to her feet. Her knees started to buckle again, but with an expert motion he thrust his head under her armpit, and in a twinkling was carrying her upright out of the room, holding her arm over his shoulders

with his left hand, his right arm clasped firmly under her breast. The proprietor slammed the outside door after them.

"Let's get out of here," Albert said.

Bill surveyed the place with a disgruntled expression.

"Let's get us a woman."

"Where?" asked Albert.

"Outside; there's none in here."

"Pick 'em up?"

"Yeah."

Outside the air was damp and sticky. It was the middle of June, but the weather had turned suddenly cold. The two friends walked single file out of the alley and then side by side down the narrow street. At the entrance to another alley a sailor was lying, propped up against the corner of a building, his head hanging forward on his chest, his white cap on the ground beside him. His pants were wide open in front, and he had wet himself. They walked by, and then Bill stopped and went back. He picked up the sailor's hat and placed it over the exposed part in front. He folded the man's limp hands over the hat to hold it in place. He joined Albert.

"We're all buddies," said Bill with a nasty laugh.

They walked on.

"Think there'd be any over in the park?" Albert asked.

"Bound to be."

They headed for the park. Just before they got to the entrance they saw two girls coming out. They had no time to decide who would take which.

"Hi," said Bill.

The girls kept coming. They whispered to each other. Bill stepped to one side of the path and Albert to the other. As they passed, they joined them, walked along beside them. Bill began to chatter pleasantly; Albert said nothing. His girl looked at him. Albert put his hand through her arm, and they fell behind the other couple, following them in silence.

Her name was Lottie. She was thin and hungry-looking, and her head barely came to his shoulder. Her hair was slate-colored, and she had a pale little face with pleasantly curved lips. She carried herself straight, even proudly, and she was very quiet. Albert felt that he could pick her up with one hand and carry her home in his palm.

The two girls roomed together on Caron Street, about six or eight blocks from the park. During the day they worked in a match factory.

"Listen," said Bill, stopping with his girl and blocking the path, "everything's dead at the speaks, and the girls don't want to go in anyway on account of they might get picked up in a raid. What do you say we all walk up to the hospital, and I'll go in and get some good stuff, and we'll have a party."

"Where," asked Albert's girl.

"Why, at our place, naturally," said Bill's girl. She was a plump, full-breasted Irish girl, with a devil-may-care manner and the voice of a fishwoman.

"You know what the landlady told us," Lottie said warningly; "no sailors."

"Aw, nuts," said the other. "She'll be in bed with the butcher by the time we get there."

"Oh, by the way," said Bill. "This is Albert Comfort. Albert, this is Babe."

"How do you do, Albert," said Babe, putting her index finger to her chin and cocking her head with assumed coyness.

"Babe's kind of coarse," Lottie whispered, as they walked toward the hospital. "I'm afraid we'll get in trouble with the landlady," she added.

"We won't make any noise," Albert said.

She was trembling slightly, and Albert too felt a thrill of nervousness. He squeezed her hand to reassure her, and felt elated at her answering pressure.

Bill brought two pint bottles of straight alcohol out of the hospital.

"Whew," he said. "That Marine suspected something. I thought he was going to search me. Told him I left my coat in a speakeasy and had to go back for it."

The girls' apartment consisted of one room and a community bath in the hall. There was a fairly large alcove jutting off in the front near the windows. The alcove was covered with a curtain, and it was large enough to hold a double bed and a bureau. There were a studio couch, two overstuffed arm chairs, one wooden rocking chair, three straight chairs, and a folding table. The one large closet was stuffed with dresses, coats, and shoes. Behind the open door of the closet was a card table. The window ledge served as an ice-box. The carpet

was frayed at the edges and had a large hole in the middle, partially concealed by the folding table.

Bill had bought two large bottles of cherry soda on the way up, and he put them on the outside window ledge after mixing up some drinks.

Lottie made a face when she sipped her drink. Babe let out a whistle.

"Great God," she cried, and at Lottie's warning signal for quiet, clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Straight alkie and soda," said Bill. "You can't expect it to go down like milk."

They drank without relish, but the stuff had an immediate effect. Both men forgot the doldrums of the hour before. The girls grew talkative and happy. All grew passionate.

At one-thirty they went to bed, Bill sleeping with Babe in the alcove, and Albert and Lottie on the studio couch. In the morning they promised the girls to come back that evening. Lottie kissed Albert wistfully, and said nothing. She knew he wouldn't be back.

During the day Albert and Bill talked it over. By pooling their salaries they would have well over a hundred dollars a month; Bill was getting seventy-two, and Albert fifty-four, after one promotion. They could get a furnished apartment in that section for about thirty-five dollars, two rooms and a kitchenette. The girls could stop working if they wanted to, and the two men could get permission to sleep out at night.

"We could get some civilian clothes and look like men

again," Albert said.

"Do you think you could trust Lottie?"

Albert nodded.

"I can trust Babe," Bill said. "But I'd rather see them working. Keep them busy during the day. We wouldn't have to worry about them at night; we'd be there."

Lottie stared at Albert in unbelief as the two men came in that night. He pulled her to him rather roughly and kissed her. She clung to him, crying softly.

In the new apartment trouble began almost immediately. Both girls had voted to continue working at the factory; they wouldn't, otherwise, know what to do with themselves during the day -- and Lottie was secretly afraid to give up her job, lest she couldn't get it back again if anything happened, if this didn't last. But Babe threw up her job after the third week. She wanted to keep house.

Bill was suspicious. He wanted Lottie to sneak back from the factory some day, plead a headache or something, and spy on her; but Lottie refused. Neither of the men could leave the hospital during the day; they had to wait until five o'clock. The two had terrible scenes, which usually ended with Babe in hysterics and Bill contrite, nervous, and still suspicious.

Until one day Bill, ugly and desperate, climbed over the wall of the reservation during noon hour, ran all the way to the apartment house, and tiptoed up to the apartment. He found her with another sailor, a seaman stationed at the Navy Yard. Bill sat quietly by while the seaman dressed and

Babe tearfully packed her clothes. As they were leaving he took her key from her and told them in a soft voice that if they ever came back he would break their necks with a great deal of pleasure. Bill went back to work, getting in over the wall without being missed.

"I've had enough," Bill said to Albert.

Albert found a smaller apartment for twenty dollars a month. Lottie was happy. She cooked breakfast and supper for them and kept the house clean and neat. They seldom went out at night. Albert read and Lottie sewed. She wasn't very fond of books, although she liked newspapers and magazines. Once in a while they went to a speakeasy, but they didn't enjoy themselves. Lottie wondered what would happen when his enlistment was up. She knew that he had applied for a special order discharge, and she felt pretty certain that he would not re-enlist.

One day Albert was lying on the studio couch reading a book. He felt drowsy; it was Saturday afternoon, and Lottie wouldn't be home until five. There was a knock on the door; probably the landlady. He called "come in", without getting up. He heard a woman's step on the floor and turned his head. It was Babe. She looked a little naggard, but still had her nerve with her.

"How you doin', sailor? I heard you moved, so I dropped over to see you."

"What do you want?" said Albert gruffly.

"Now, that's no way to greet a pal." She helped herself

to a seat. "I'm just payin' a friendly little call."

"Lottie's not home."

"Well, ain't you my friend?"

"No." Albert picked up his book and flipped a couple of pages.

"Got a cigarette?"

Albert tossed her a pack, and she lit one.

"You needn't think I came to see you," she said flippantly.

"I thought Lottie might be around. But since you're here, you'll do just as well. I want to borrow some money."

"Where's your seaman?"

"I've got another one now. But he's up in Portland. I've gotta get some money for fare so I can move up there."

"Why doesn't he send you some?"

"He did. But I used it for rent. Now I'm stuck. The landlady wouldn't let me take my stuff out until I paid up."

Albert lay still, thinking.

"How's Bill?"

"He's all right," he said.

"Getting out soon, ain't he?"

"Four months."

"Think he'd lend me some money?"

Albert laughed.

"He's got nothing to kick about," she said offended.

"How much do you want?"

"Twenty dollars."

Albert reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet.

He took out two ten dollar bills and held them up for her. She came over and took them. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her down on the couch beside him. She kissed him, at first with gratitude and then passionately.

After she had left, Albert was frightened. He had taken no precautions whatever. He straightened his clothes, put on his coat, and hurried back to the hospital. At the dispensary he told Bill what had happened.

"You're a fool," Bill said, and gave him some Argyrol. "What about Lottie?"

Albert didn't understand.

"You know if you've got anything you'll give it to her."

"How soon can I be sure?" Albert asked.

"If it doesn't show up in three weeks, you're all right."

"Three weeks!"

"Better use rubbers until then, if you care anything about Lottie."

"No use making her suffer for my mistakes."

On his way back to the apartment he remembered that it was Saturday night. He stopped into a drugstore. "Maybe she'll forget," he thought, stuffing the little package into his watch pocket.

As they were undressing that night, the package dropped out of his pocket. She saw it and looked at him wonderingly.

"What did you get them for?" she asked.

He fumbled awkwardly with his clothes. "We're going to use them for a while."

She was deathly pale. "Don't you trust me?"

"Sure. I... well... I thought we better use them."

"Why?"

"I..."

"'Fraid I'll have a baby?"

"No.... Yes, that's it. I've less than a year to go, you know, and I don't want anything to happen."

"You're lying. You know very well the doctor said I couldn't."

He said nothing. It was true.

"You're lying, aren't you."

He nodded.

"Who was it?"

He lied. "I don't know her name."

"When?"

"This afternoon."

"Only this afternoon?"

"Yes. Never before. And never again. You don't have to worry; she's gone."

He crawled miserably into bed. He was worried and ashamed. She lay on her side, crying for a long time. Suddenly she turned.

"It was Babe, wasn't it."

"Yes," he said.

"Where did she go?"

"The dirty skunk," she said. She had stopped crying. He leaned over and kissed her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You had the right."

I did it more because I hated her than for any other reason."

She held him close without saying anything. Finally she got out of bed and picked up the little package on the floor. She climbed back in and put the package under the pillow.

"How long do we have to use them?" she said.

"Three weeks."

At the end of three weeks he breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing had happened. He was still clean. Lucky.

At the end of his enlistment, ten months later, their parting was simple, and, as they both knew, final. He was going to wash his hands clean of the Navy, of everything and everybody connected with it. A new life. He boarded a subway which was to take him to the North Station, and Lottie came along to see him off. It was Sunday morning, quarter of ten, and the train left at ten-fifteen. On the subway they talked of common ordinary things, and smiled at the funny-looking man across the aisle. No word of sentiment. No holding of hands..

He bought his ticket at the station and boarded the train. Then he climbed back out again, leaving his suitcase in the aisle; he had forgotten to kiss her -- it seemed like such an ordinary occasion that he had merely said goodbye and stepped on the train. She smiled when she saw him reappear. He held her in his arms for a brief moment, kissed her, and

leaped on the platform. Neither of them said a word. The train started to move before he reached his seat. He hurried to a window and looked out. She was waving to him with one hand and holding her handkerchief to her mouth with the other. He waved once and sat down. He shoved his suitcase under his legs. Goodbye, Navy..

VI

After leaving Albert, Eric walked slowly toward home. It was beginning to get dark. He felt depressed. While listening to Albert's story, he had forced himself to think tolerantly of his friend, to make allowances for the circumstances into which he had been cast, virtually against his will. In spite of his tolerance, however, Eric was aware of a growing repulsion for the other man -- not positive -- just a feeling of dislike that was barely formed. But it was enough to make him uneasy, for he seldom felt that way toward anyone.

In that respect Eric was much like his mother. He had probably inherited from her his forgiving nature, a largeness of soul, with meshes so wide that the meanness and the little faults of those it embraced slipped through unnoticed. But unlike his mother, he was a keen, though kindly, judge of character, albeit his judgement was undoubtedly more intuitive than logical.

There was no clash between their minds. They thought differently, Eric was convinced, about certain fundamental issues; their philosophies were as wide apart as the poles. But Eric felt no challenge. He was certain that these issues would never come up between them for debate; each would accept the other's ideas as part of the man, bitter or sweet as the case might be, but digestible. For this reason Eric had felt

no inclination to condemn his friend for his past, for the things he had done while in the navy, although Eric had been vaguely disappointed that Albert had been so unreserved in revealing so much after so brief an acquaintance. It was as though the other man were bent on leaping headlong across the chasm of reserve that usually is left for time to bridge.

No, the conflict was not in their ideas, their minds, but in their wills. Of this Eric was only half-heartedly aware now, but as time went on he became more and more assured that he was right. At present he felt only vaguely that Albert was exerting a sort of compulsion, was pitting the strength of his will against Eric's, in what direction Eric could not tell. Beneath his friend's impulsiveness he felt there was a hard core of reserve that could never be penetrated, and within that diamond-like core Albert's will was exerting itself against his, and Eric was instinctively resentful.

As he was crossing the bridge in the middle of town, he paused to look at the river beneath. Someone tapped him on the elbow. It was Eileen. She was wearing a plain black business suit and a brimless black hat that made her look older than she really was and more sophisticated, but no less beautiful.

"Well," she said, laughing, "you look as though you'd seen a ghost. Has my brother been frightening you?"

"No," he stammered, "I... didn't expect... expect to see you."

"Did you get my letter?"

Her face now looked just as he had seen it in his delirium, like that of a precocious child, unpleasantly wise beyond its years. Yet she was extraordinarily attractive.

"Yes." He felt himself blushing.

She studied him for a moment, and then looked down at the river below.

"What did you think of it?" she asked, without looking at him.

"I thought you were very kind to ask me to visit you."

She gave him a quick look, and he thought she was angry.

"Well, I didn't intend to write that -- it was just an impulse. You can forget about it if you want to."

He could think of nothing to say.

She asked, "Are you going home?"

"Yes."

"Let's walk together. I'm going by your house. I'm having supper with the Cadwells."

Tim Cadwell and his wife lived about a quarter of a mile beyond Eric's house. He had a small farm, and he did odd jobs for Eric's mother. Eric was very fond of the old couple, whom he had known all his life. He was surprised that Eileen should be on friendly terms with them, but he said nothing.

They walked. Eric noticed that people stared at her as they passed. She was holding his arm just above the elbow, and was walking a little bit sidewise so that she could look into his face.

"Did my brother tell you all about me?"

He shook his head. "No. Nothing at all except that you worked for Mr. Burton."

"Oh, that's not so bad. I thought he might be in a raving mood, but I suppose he raved himself all out yesterday on the train."

"Do you like my suit?" she asked suddenly, swinging around in front of him so that she was almost walking backwards. "I bought it in New York Saturday. It's very expensive." She pushed on his arm and made him stop. She took a couple of steps ahead of him, stopped, and pirouetted, facing him at the end with a serious expression.

"Well?" She pouted.

"It's lovely," he said. A woman walked past them and turned around to look at them.

"It's very becoming," he added. "But I think you'd look beautiful in anything."

He felt himself blushing, and knew that she noticed it.

She looked pleased, and suddenly she burst out laughing.

"Come on," she said, taking him by the hand. "You're a darling, but you're awful funny."

Eileen said, "This morning I thought of you while I was working and of all the horrid things Albert must have told you about me. Somehow I didn't want you to think too badly of me, even though I didn't know you very well. So at lunchtime I wrote you that note."

"Will Ashley gave it to me this afternoon on my way down."

"That was a funny thing," she said. "Just now I saw you

standing on the bridge just where Will Ashley was standing when I gave him the letter. Wasn't that strange - you were like a personal answer to my note."

"I stopped to look at the river."

"Did you think of me when you passed Burton Block?"

He confessed that he had.

She told him about her work as secretary to Lawyer Burton. She seemed to like her work and her employer, which surprised him, for Mr. Burton was not very well liked around town. She said nothing about her trip to New York or about their meeting Sunday. As they passed the Times Press printing office she jerked her head toward it saying,

"That's where my loving brother works."

She chatted animatedly all the way, but he could not overcome the feeling of self-consciousness that had assailed him when he met her. It was as though his conscience told him that he was doing something that would not be approved -- or perhaps Albert's dark face when he spoke of his sister rose in his mind and made him feel uncomfortable. He could not trace the feeling.

They stopped at the entrance to the driveway that led to his house.

"When are you coming to see me?" Eileen asked, "now that you've visited my brother."

He didn't dare look at her.

"Whenever you please," he said.

"Well, I please... sometime soon."

She gave his hand a little squeeze.

"Goodbye," she said.

He wondered how it would all come out, between Albert and his sister, how they would finally settle their quarrel, their chronic disagreement. How far would Albert go in trying to suppress his sister? He seemed capable of taking severe, even violent, measures if the occasion demanded them, and Eric wondered how long it would be before he thought that severe measures were necessary. And he wondered what was the extent of Eileen's resisting powers. How much would she dare to antagonize her brother, and was her passion, or her love, whatever it was, stronger than her fear of Albert, if she was afraid of him?

What kind of a girl was she? She didn't look common. She seemed to be strong-minded, strong-willed, perhaps a little impulsive and even daring, but nevertheless Eric thought that he detected a depth to her, a hidden violence of feeling that smouldered under the surface. And although he didn't admit it to himself, he was somewhat discomfited, too, by an occasional animal-like-coarseness that seemed to reveal itself in Eileen under the surface beauty. It was as though the primitive were never very far away, nor always under perfect control.

After supper that night they were all sitting in the living room. There was a bright fire in the stone fireplace,

and Cleone and Eric were sitting on the settee in front of it.. Aunt Myra had pulled a rocking chair near the fire on the south side, and Eric's mother was sitting in her favorite chair on the other side of the fire. The group made a little circle in front of the iron screen that protected the room from stray sparks.

Cleone had on a pretty blue muslin dress, which seemed sometimes dark and sometimes light as the flames rose and fell in the fireplace. There was only one light on in the room, a table lamp back of them on the table near the porch window. Her long slender legs were crossed and her hands rested on her knee. Eric stole a glance at her once or twice, but she was apparently paying no attention to him. She was gazing at the fire, her face calm and composed, a little curved line at the corner of her mouth suggesting a smile.

"I couldn't tell you at the supper table," Aunt Myra said. "It was too awful. Disgusting."

"You probably know the people better than I do, Mary," she said to her sister-in-law. "Do you know Mrs. Mattison?"

"Why yes," Eric's mother said. "Her husband works for the electric company. He's a line-man, or something like that."

"Does she have a child?"

"Yes, a little girl. Must be almost school age now. Awfully cute little thing. I saw them both last week, or not so long ago as that; let's see, when was it. They were on the train with Eric. They got off just before he did. Do you remember, Eric? Or you wouldn't know them anyway."

Eric recalled the chubby little girl in the ski suit, who had kept watching him in the waiting room. He remembered the matted blond hair and the blue eyes. And the young mother reading a magazine. He hadn't noticed them when they got off the train at Keton.

"That's the one," Mrs. Halliday said. She was rocking back and forth, rather stiffly, in the rocking chair. "The mother's about thirty and the little girl five."

"What about them?" Mrs. Tobin asked. "They were all right yesterday."

"Well, this afternoon when I went down town the mother was running around frantically." Mrs. Halliday's voice was leisurely, but her body was tense. "The little girl was lost. Nobody had seen her since one o'clock in the afternoon. The poor mother was practically out of her mind."

"The poor thing," Mrs. Tobin said. "But they're always getting lost at that age, and being found again. They found her, I suppose."

"Yes." said Aunt Myra. "They found her." She stopped rocking. "Dead."

"Oh no!" Mrs. Tobin's voice rang with horror. "Myra! How awful. I can't believe it. Heavens! What a shock! The poor woman. Myra! You should have told us sooner. I must do something. How did it happen? What was it? Was she run over? Hit-and-run?"

"What could you do? There's nothing you can do. She was found in the woods in back of her house. She had been

killed."

Mrs. Tobin gasped.

"She had no clothes on. It looks like a sex crime."

"Oh!"

Everyone was stupified. Cleone was the first to recover herself.

"Mother! What a thing to tell! Do you want to shock us all into fits?" She gave a quick, compassionate glance at Eric, who was sitting with drawn face staring into the fire. "It's probably not true. It can't be."

Mrs. Halliday spoke in a hard voice. "Such things happen in the world, my girl, and there's no sense in hiding them. It's disgusting, but it's true." She looked uncertainly at Eric, realizing that she had gone too far. She had forgotten the danger.

Without looking up, and in a choked voice, Eric said, "Who did it?"

"Never mind, Eric," his mother said nervously. "Let's forget about it."

"I'll do something in the morning," she added.

Eric looked at his aunt. "Do they know?" he said.

"Some fiend, probably," Cleone said, signalling her mother.

"What do they think?" Eric persisted, looking at his aunt.

"They don't know," she said miserably with a hint of defiance.. "They think it's that awful... halfwit... that Johnny... somebody..."

"Kinney?"

She nodded. "Johnny Kinney."

"Oh it couldn't be," Mrs. Tobin exclaimed. Johnny wouldn't do a thing like that. Why, he's perfectly harmless. He's never touched anyone in his life. He just looks bad, frightens you to death just to look at him, until you get used to him."

"You never know," said Aunt Myra.

Eric leaned back in the settee, gazing steadily into the fire. Cleone had moved, unnoticed, closer to him, and he felt her hand close over his in the space between them, out of sight. He felt comforted and somehow relieved, but the thoughts in his mind were confused and disturbed.

Johnny Kinney had been in Keton ever since Eric could remember, always the same, always dirty, clothed in a baggy suit that was sticky with filth, wandering slowly and ceaselessly around the streets and the outlying roads of the town.. As Eric's mother had said, he was a frightening figure to look at, but he had never been known to molest anyone. He was short and stocky, with extraordinarily long and dangling arms. His neck was sunk between his shoulders, and his head was thrust forward from the rest of his body as though it were fastened to his chest instead of to his shoulders. His hair hung over his face, and his washed-out blue eyes looked out from among the strands with a vacant questioning expression. Through the stubble of his beard, that never seemed to grow to a greater length than a half an inch, his lips, blue instead of red, could be seen parted in a perpetual meaningless leer.

It was this leer, combined with his queer snuffling gait, somewhat like the swagger of an ape, that frightened people; and when women met him walking on the sidewalks in town, they would often cringe against the inside wall, even though Johnny walked close to the curb, giving others all the room he could. And he seemed totally unaware that anyone was frightened on his account.

Periodical attempts were made to confine him in the poor house, but Johnny wouldn't stay confined. The town officials compromised by giving him a bath and a general cleaning up once a year, and for a day or two after that Johnny would look almost respectable. By now Keton had long been used to him; no one ever mentioned him except the women and occasional visitors who encountered him on their way through town. Otherwise he shuffled his aimless way unnoticed.

The question did come up, however, every so often, as to how he was able to live, where and what he ate, and where he slept. Fabulous stories were told of a huge fortune that had been left him by his family and which was now in the custody of the bank. And for a long time it had been noised about, and believed by people not otherwise known for their gullibility, that Johnny was being supported by Lawyer Burton, whose real name wasn't Burton at all, or so they said, but Kinney, and he was Johnny Kinney's elder brother. But this story may have had its root in the general antipathy that Keton felt for the crafty old lawyer whose cunning brain had earned him a fortune and an army of enemies. Nevertheless some of the

older inhabitants of Keton remembered that Johnny Kinney had not appeared until shortly after Lawyer Burton had come to town and set up a little law office. Attempts to question Johnny were, of course, useless; the extent of his vocabulary seemed to be two words, which he spoke indiscriminately and without regard for timeliness or appropriateness. "Fine day," he would say brightly to all their questions, looking at them with his vacant stare and his silly leer, "fine day, fine day, fine day." This meagre result in itself, however, was considered pretty good evidence, for up until very recently Lawyer Burton would accept the greetings of his acquaintances, when he met them on the street, with a slow, almost ritualistic nod of his head and a pert exclamation, "Fine day!"

Eric discounted these reports as pure gossip. He accepted Johnny as an isolated fact, the town character, pitiable but harmless. Nor did he believe that Johnny had committed the horrible crime which his aunt had just told them of. But if not Johnny, who then? Might not many people be asking the same question, and if they knew of his, Eric's, past, might not their thoughts naturally turn -- He snuddered. He had been on the same train with the mother and her little girl; the mother had seen him. He had arrived two days before the crime.

He felt Cleone's hand tighten on his. But he had been at home all morning, and with Albert all afternoon or most of it.

"Wouldn't you like to go for a little walk before bed?"

Cleone asked.

"Why don't you, dear," his mother said. She was knitting again, but her face had a worried look, and she was watching him anxiously. Aunt Myra was rocking vigorously now. Her face was set and pale, but it looked relaxed around the eyes as though she were on the point of weeping.

"Yes," said Eric, getting up. He stood for a moment uncertainly in front of the fire, Cleone still clasping his hand, standing beside him.

Mrs. Halliday stopped rocking, watching him tensely. Cleone put her arm around his waist and gave him a playful squeeze.

"Come on," she said gaily. "Let's walk in the moonlight."

He looked at her and smiled, feeling suddenly warm and happy again. They went out.

For some time there was silence in the living room after the two young people had left, except for the steady click of Mary Tobin's knitting needles. At last Myra spoke in a choked voice.

"I'm sorry, Mary," she said. "I shouldn't have been so thoughtless. I didn't think what I was doing." She sniffled audibly.

"Don't worry, Myra," Mrs. Tobin said kindly. "He'll be all right. It was a shock to all of us. He'll be all right."

Again there was silence except for an occasional snuffle. Aunt Myra brightened..

"You know," she said, "I think Cleone is good for him.

She's taken him right under her wing."

Mary Tobin smiled, and the sisters looked at each other understandingly.

Eric spent most of the next afternoon with his cousin. He slept late in the morning, and after getting up he found that his mother had gone shopping in town. He had a talk with Aunt Myra, who seemed to be anxious to talk, although she stuck to no particular subject for any length of time, and for the most part tried to avoid the subject that she had mentioned the night before. She seemed to be trying to prove to him that she had no love for the sensational and that the crime had not made a very big impression on her. Eric recognized that this attitude in his aunt was adopted for his sake, and he tried to co-operate with her by keeping away from the subject.

But inevitably the conversation seemed to be drawn as though by a magnetic influence into the very channel that they wished to avoid. And finally he spoke of meeting the mother and child on his way to Keton.

"She was a very sweet little girl," Eric said. "Big brown eyes and a very expressive, nappy, face. Her mother ---" and he described Mrs. Mattison.

As he did so he remembered the peculiar thing that Albert had said at the station, that she, Mrs. Mattison, was Eileen's best friend but that they weren't on speaking terms. He wondered why they had quarreled.

"I met Natalie's children on the train," he said. "They're not children any more -- about my age."

"Humph," said Aunt Myra. "Did they know you?"

"Yes. I think they -- resented me -- felt embarrassed -- because of their mother."

"Funny family," Aunt Myra said. "I think she's --" but she did not finish.

"They're really not to blame -- " Eric started, but he could give no reason, and so he stopped.

"I don't think much of a mother who could desert her children as she did -- and never go to see them even though she lives in the same town."

"I think she keeps track of them, though," Eric said.

"She's unnatural. No mother in her right mind could do that."

Eric tried to defend Natalie, although he hardly knew on what grounds she could be defended; but his aunt was adamant in her condemnation.

Again the conversation turned to yesterday's tragedy.

Aunt Myra said, "Just think how that Mrs. Mattison, a normal mother, must feel. Her heart is breaking."

In the afternoon he agreed readily to go for a hike with Cleone. She joined him soon after dinner, dressed in a slip-over sweater and a heavy gray skirt, and sport shoes. She looked athletic and happy, a glow of health in her cheeks and in her gray eyes.

They went out the back door and scrambled down the terrace in back of the barn.

"Look," she said.

Beyond the fields and the trees that lay ahead of them and beyond the low rolling hills the Adirondacks loomed in the distance still white with snow, shining in a bright haze of sunlight. The sky was cloudless and bright blue. The brightness hurt their eyes, and they had to look away.

"Isn't it wonderful," she said, her face glowing.

Eric rested his eyes by looking at the nearer hills. This was the home that he remembered from the years past, the countless times he had stood on just this spot and looked out over the fields, the woods, and the hills, to the mountains in the distance, and then clambering back up the terrace toward the east and the quiet easy beauty of the Green Mountains, toward which his house faced. The Adirondacks, brutally impressive, were far enough away not to be overwhelming; and the Green Mountains, with all their nearness, were never too dominant, never oppressive, never anything but restful to the eye. He felt suddenly in love with his home.

"You know," he said as they walked on, "only just now I begin to feel that I'm home."

"You've hardly had time to realize it."

"Not so much that. But this is what I liked best when I was here." He waved his hand. "This was home to me; this is what home means."

"You must have missed it terribly. It's such a beautiful

country."

"I didn't, though. I didn't miss it at all. It was like another life, way in the past, that I'd never come back to. I hardly remembered it. But now everything comes back." He laughed. "I'm homesick, for the first time."

They came to a barbed wire fence, and he held up the bottom wire so she could crawl under. Then she held it up for him.

"Let's forget it," she said, her face lighting up with excitement.

Ahead of them lay a flat open field, stretching away for almost a mile and ending in a series of rolling hills with woods beyond.

"Catch me," she cried gaily. "I'll race you to the other end."

She started away, running easily, with long strides. Eric bounded after her. They raced along over the smooth soft surface. Eric gained on her, almost caught her, but she dodged, twisted away, and before he could stop was off again, laughing and waving her hand. Her blond hair, long and wavy, was tumbling down about her neck and shoulders, and a strand or two was streaming out behind her. Again he almost caught her, but again she eluded him. He gave up and sank to the ground, winded.

"What's the matter?" she called, stopping and turning around. There was a note of fear in her voice.

"I'm getting strength for a new start."

She laughed and sat down facing him, about twenty yards away.

"Better not sit too long," she said. "The ground's damp."

He sat there for a while, breathing heavily. He pointed to the sky behind her.

"Look at the hawk," he said.

She looked, and he leaped up, advancing swiftly on tiptoe. But she heard him and was off without looking behind. Her laugh floated back to him, and he grinned happily. Again they raced and he gained on her slowly, yard by yard. Just before they reached the foot of the hill, he caught her by the sweater, and held her, pulling her to a stop.

"O. K.," she gasped, "you win." She sank to her knees on the ground, out of breath, pushing her hair back from her face with both hands.

"Come on," he said, taking her hand and pulling her to her feet. "We can rest up there."

They struggled up the hill, each helping the other, gasping for breath, their faces flushed with excitement and exercise. At the top of the hill they found a dry place to sit.

"What a race!" Cleone said, flinging herself face down on the dry grass.

"Just a warm-up," said Eric. His lungs felt as though they were going to burst through his chest, and he could hear his heart pounding like the put-put of a motor boat. Cleone looked at him and laughed.

"You couldn't have gone another step if you'd had to."

The sun was very bright, with a penetrating warmth, but the breath of winter still could be felt in the air. In the shade it would have been cold. The hill they sat on was one of three, with narrow valleys in between; they were like huge hummocks left by a giant plough, with the windrows between them. On the other side of the farthest hill, only about a half mile away, was a stretch of woods, barren of leaves and color except for the scattered evergreens. The woods stretched for miles, looking as though they reached to the foot of the mountains, although in fact they came only to the shores of Lake Champlain, which was hidden in the distance. Eric had tramped through them many times, and he knew they were not as formidable as they looked; they were broken up by roads and farm land and houses. All that could be seen now, however, was a vast stretch of apparently unbroken woodland fronted by the rolling body of the Adirondacks.

As Eric sat there, his fretfulness left him. The peace and quiet of the scene became a part of him, and he felt a quiet, restful joy. The view seemed new to him and yet not new; it was familiar to his eye, he knew every part of it, and yet his mind reacted to it as though he had never seen it. He felt an enchantment, as one feels in looking at something mysteriously beautiful, with such a depth and such an abundance of beauty, that one never tires of looking at it, always familiar and yet always new. Ever since he could remember, he had felt drawn and called by the woods, had wanted to walk through them, to lie down in them, to explore them, even to sleep there.

They were like a drug that wouldn't let him rest until he had smothered his senses with it. Often he had sat on this hill or on the next and looked out across the woods to the mountains, knowing that in a few moments he would have plunged in among the trees and would be walking slowly, absorbedly toward the shadow of the mountains.

Feeling the old longing for the woods, he felt suddenly ashamed. For the realization abruptly dawned on him that there was something in this call that the wildness of the woods made to his blood that was vaguely sexual in its nature. It was as though the forest were a woman, wild and lovely, beckoning him, promising; and his body was urging him, unbearably forcing him toward her waiting arms. His delirium dream of his first night at home came back to him with strange vividness. He felt with a sudden conviction that the cave in which he had been lying was in these mountains, and the whole atmosphere of the dream had been the atmosphere of the woods. The faces of Cleone and Eileen swept across his vision, and he seemed to hear his own mad cry as the long red fingernails grazed the warm flesh of Eileen's face, obliterating it. A spasm of sickness surged from his stomach to his throat, and he felt his shoulders and neck go weak and flaccid.

Cleone was sitting up, looking at him.

"What's the matter, Eric?" she said, watching him anxiously.

Her soft voice, filled with concern, had a ring of familiarity and warmth that brought them suddenly close to each other, as though she had laid her fingers on his arm or smoothened

back his hair with her hand.

"Just... homesick," he said, smiling weakly.

He lay back, with his hands under his head, shutting the woods and the mountains from his view. He turned his head so that he could look at her. She was sitting up, with one hand on the ground, supporting her, turned sidewise toward him, and scanning his face with a worried expression.

"You were thinking of that little girl, weren't you," she said. "You shouldn't let things affect you so."

"It was just a... a thought," Eric said, "a sort of spasm.. It's all over now." He had forgotten about Mary Mattison -- and he tried to forget again.

They were silent. She continued to look at him, and he turned his head now and then to meet her eyes.

There's such a difference in their eyes, he thought -- he was unconsciously comparing her to Eileen -- and he thought of the two lakes he knew so well. Cleone's were like Lake George, calm, steady, and restful, and clear to the very depths -- a phrase from a prayer book passed through his mind -- and the peace that passeth all understanding be amongst you and remain with you now and always, Amen. The Benediction. The eyes of the benediction must be gray eyes, he thought, calm with the peace that passeth all understanding. And Eileen's were like Lake Champlain, turbid and deep. Silent, sweet, and passive for one moment on a gentle summer's day, and the next moment stirring angrily with an unpredictable violence, surging and overwhelming, swept into fury by some hidden soul of passion. And



the eyes of passion must be black eyes, cloudy, the signs of storm.

"Eric," Cleone said, "what's the matter with Mrs. Comfort?"

He was startled.

"Do you know," he said, "in another minute I would have thought of her. My thoughts were leading right that way."

She laughed. "Were you thinking? I thought you were dreaming. You had a dreamy light in your eyes."

"I was thinking about people's eyes. Did you ever notice her eyes -- Natalie's?"

"Mrs. Comfort?"

He nodded. "They're like cloudy water. They're all clouded up; you can't see anything in them."

"They're full of pain," Cleone said. "I feel so sorry for her."

"Not so much pain, now, as just plain blankness. I think it was pain that made them that way."

"When people have suffered terribly for a long time, their eyes get that way, I think."

Eric said, "Like a fuse that has blown out."

"Just like it," she said. "The current was too strong. And now it's all underneath. Do you know what I mean? Nothing shows any more, but the current is probably just as strong."

"She frightens me sometimes," Cleone added.

"I don't know. I don't think she's... malicious. It's just that if you don't know what a person is thinking or feeling, you're afraid of them -- automatically. You can't help it."

"She's had a hard life." He told her what he knew of Mrs. Comfort, what he had heard from his mother and from other people. Cleone listened with great interest, perhaps more interested in taking Eric's mind away from himself than in hearing the story.

"And doesn't she ever see her children?" she asked after he had finished.

"Once in a while," he said. "I think she checks up on them more than they realize. I can't understand her. Nor them. Sometimes I think that she hates them and always has, and that they hate her."

"Oh, Eric, how could she? How could they?"

"Maybe to you," he said thoughtfully, "such things aren't possible. When I think about it logically, I think that it's not possible; but somehow I feel... I just... feel that it's so. They're different from you and me -- no worse, understand -- but just... different."

"They're very unhappy," he added.

"What's the girl like?" Cleone asked, looking away, avoiding his eyes.

He faltered. "She's... well, I can't describe her. She's very beautiful."

She looked at him quickly, a little scornfully. "Are you in love with her?"

He didn't answer.

"Is that whom you went to see yesterday afternoon?"

"No. I went to see her brother. I... did see her, though.

I met her accidentally on the street, on my way home."

"Oh." Cleone's voice was casual. "Is that true... what they say about her... what my mother said?"

Eric flushed. He raised himself on his elbow and looked at her seriously.

"Those two are..." he was painfully sincere... "the most unhappy people you can imagine."

"Is it true?" she persisted.

"I... don't think so."

"You love her?" she said softly.

"No, I don't. I don't think I do. I pity her. I pity her with all my heart."

"Will you take me to see her some day?"

He was suddenly delighted. "Why of course. She'd be happy. She'd be sure to love you. People couldn't help loving you."

Cleone blushed, and her eyes danced.

"I think she's awfully lonely," Eric added.

"How about her brother?"

"He is too."

"My mother found out about them, you know. She's interested in that sort of thing." She appeared to be a little bit ashamed of her mother. "She likes to gossip."

She looked at him as though daring to say anything against her mother.

Cleone continued. "People speak of him with respect, but they don't seem to like him. He's not a Communist after all."

He works for the Keton paper."

"Yes, I know."

"He was in the Navy."

Eric nodded.

"Did he tell you all that?" Cleone asked.

"He told me quite a lot about his experiences in the Navy."

"Were they interesting?"

"Yes. Very."

"For instance."

For some time he didn't answer.

Finally he said, "Well, he had a hard time adjusting himself."

"Is that all?"

"That's enough to make a person's life pretty miserable."

"When are you going to see her?" she asked after a short silence.

"I... don't know." He was confused by her abruptness.

Cleone got up, and he rose.

"Would you like to walk to the woods?" she asked.

"No," he said quickly. The thought of Cleone and the woods together repulsed him. "Not unless you really want to?"

They walked back toward home, very silent. He looked at her furtively now and then, but her face was clear and untroubled; she seemed to be meditating. He felt with discouragement that their first experience together had been a failure; somehow now they seemed farther apart than when they had started. But

at the foot of the terrace in back of the house she suddenly stopped and faced him. She took his hand in both of hers and looked into his eyes intently.

"Eric," she said, very earnestly, "don't go to see him again... or her. They're... not good for you. You shouldn't. Drop them now before it's too late."

He was happy at her concern, and yet a little alarmed.

"But I promised," he said.

"Break it," she said, squeezing his hand tightly. "Break it off. You won't be sorry. For your own sake."

He wanted to laugh at her seriousness, but he checked himself for fear of hurting her feelings.

"There's something wrong," she continued, "with the whole family. You need rest, and you won't find it... with them."

"All right," he conceded.

"Do you mean it?" she cried joyfully..

He nodded. She leaned over quickly and kissed him on the lips.

VII

Mr. Ayres wondered what kind of face he should put on for his customers this morning. It was Wednesday, April 10th, fine weather, and a day on which shopping was generally moderately heavy. Having overslept again, he was a little late; so he got his fruit and vegetable display out front as rapidly as possible and swept the floor hurriedly and carelessly. He wanted to be caught up in his work by the time the first customers came in so that he could give his attention exclusively to them, pay attention to what they said and think carefully of what he should say in return.

That was half the battle, as he often told his wife: knowing just how to greet each customer and just what to say while they were in the store. And the greeting varied, of course. For instance, you couldn't let the full force of your personality shine on someone with a hangover; not only would it be wasted, but it would have the opposite effect from what you intended. Speak to them knowingly, sympathetically, softly; and then in the course of the visit, be sure to give them a chance to tell you all about it; whistle with amusement when they tell you how much they drank, and look at them admiringly when they tell you how easily they carried it. Never try to match their stories; that would be a fatal mistake; just be properly envious.

With some of the women you can be bold and daring (this, naturally, he never mentioned to his wife); with others you must be respectful, submissive. Take Almie Borden for example. She was twenty-seven; he knew her history well. She'd had to get married to Joe Borden before she was out of high school; Joe was a big fat slob who had always made a play for the high school girls. Now they had two children, both girls, and Joe was bigger and fatter and over forty. You couldn't blame his wife for looking around; Almie was still young, and she was damn good looking. There wasn't a gal in town he'd rather see come through the door there on a bright summer morning when the sun was in the east and shining through her dress like an x-ray. Well, that was the kind of a woman you could joke with and say suggestive things to, except that you didn't go too far because sometimes they would get sore and boycott you for a couple of weeks. Some of the others you'd have to size up pretty carefully, but you'd be surprised at what a woman would take after you got to know her weak points.

You had to keep your finger pretty well on the pulse of the town too. Some days you could be hearty with almost everybody, say on a nice bright day like this one, after a fair or just before the church supper or the day before Thanksgiving, when the town spirit is running high and everybody's riding on the crest. Other days you were sober and serious, like on the day that old Father Phillips was transferred to New Hampshire, when everybody thought, all the Episcopalians anyway, that he should finish up his days right here in Keton preaching

in the Episcopal church right across the street.. And naturally everybody was thinking about it when they came into the store, the church being so near, and they talked about it to Glenn Ayres almost as though he was an authority on the subject. Well, on a day like that you had to be sad, and the occasion demanded a judicious expression, as though you knew a hell of a lot more than you were going to tell..

Today, however, Mr. Ayres was somewhat at sea. He had to face a double difficulty. In the first place he had to adapt himself to a situation presenting several aspects entirely new to his experience. And in the second place he had to make the adaptation without any help from his wife. For usually he could tell from the way his wife reacted to a given situation just about what attitude he should take when his customers came in; she gave him his clue as to how the women, at least, were going to react, and countless times he had heard from her lips the very same words that he was to hear from the lips of other women during the course of the day. And if she approved his words, then others would. But with this nasty business he hadn't been able to make head nor tail of what she was thinking. She closed up like a clam when he mentioned it. Either she hadn't made up her mind or else she was so damn sore that she couldn't trust herself to talk. And when Mollie Ayres wouldn't talk, there just wasn't any use trying to make her; there wasn't any use trying to figure out what she was thinking either. It was a hell of a mess. How was a man going to do business if he didn't know what to say? How was he to

know whether he should even mention it to the women? Maybe it wasn't the kind of a thing that women liked to hear a man mention.

He decided not to sweep behind the counter; nobody ever saw that part of the store anyway. And he could let the back room go for today. There, someone had just passed the store and looked in. Chances were she'd be back. Better sweep off the sidewalk in a hurry. He went out and swept the sidewalk. The woman who had just passed was standing in front of the A & P, four stores farther down, looking in the window. Mrs. Goodwin, by the looks of her; she wouldn't be back; all she cared about was prices. She went inside. Mr. Ayres finished sweeping the sidewalk and went back into his store.

He coughed vigorously several times to clear his throat; the air seemed somewhat humid, and his asthma was choking him up. Now he could hear himself whistle faintly each time he breathed, and he was annoyed. He had closed the store early yesterday, leaving Will Ashley's groceries in Parks' Drug Store, and had gone home and to bed. But that did no good -- he was in for an attack. Perhaps he should pretend not to know anything about the tragedy and let someone tell it to him. Then he could get an idea as to how people were reacting. But that hurt his pride, to pretend ignorance about something he really should know about, and anyway people would expect him to know. He gave a start of surprise as a woman's voice sounded behind him; he had put the broom in a corner behind the counter and had been standing there with his back

to the door for several minutes, lost in thought.

"Good morning, Mr. Ayres."

It was Almie Borden. He swore at himself silently for not seeing her when she came through the door. She had a thin dress on, too, and no coat; probably see right through it in the proper light. Well, he'd watch her when she went out, but naturally it wasn't so good from the back.

"Good morning to you, Almie," he said, his voice rasping forcefully through the phlegm in his throat. He caught himself; he was speaking too heartily. "You gave me a start," he said, soberly and more softly.

Her voice trickled with laughter. "I saw you standing there, dreaming, so I tiptoed in. You ought to be more careful these days."

One could speak freely with Almie. "I was thinking of that poor little Mattison girl."

She shifted so swiftly and easily from laughter to horror that he was bewildered.

"Oh, wasn't that perfectly awful!" she cried. "I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't."

"Worst crime Keton ever had," he said as though putting himself on record.

"And the poor mother. She must be heartbroken."

He could see the tears in Almie's eyes. Against his will a thought persisted in his mind, how in hell could anybody pick on a kid with such a luscious morsel like Almie almost asking for it. And for that matter -- time to say something.

"The greatest tragedy is for those who are left," he said.

Almie sniffled. And for that matter, the kid's mother wasn't too hard to look at.

"I brought my girls over to Mrs. Sniffin's before I left," Almie said. "I don't dare leave them alone any more with a fiend like that at... at large."

"I should think not. I'm sometimes thankful that I haven't any children. The pain and the suffering that parents go through, and then to have something like this happen."

Mr. Ayres' lugubrious expression became sincerely sad now. His dearest wish had always been to have a child, a little girl preferably, but something ---

"Do you think it could have been Johnny?"

"I... don't know. Johnny never hurt anybody before."

She had a tomato in her hand and was fingering it without looking at it.

"He's perfectly terrible," she said. She leaned over close to him and spoke confidentially. "You know, sometimes I've met him on the street and felt... ready to fly."

He couldn't resist looking down the front of her dress, low cut at the neck. She had no braziere on, and if she would only bend forward a little more---

"He has that awful look about him. He kept looking at me just as though, just as though I was undressed... I thought he was going to grab me."

He nodded his head sympathetically. She bent down and put the tomato back in the box. Her dress hung forward in

front, and he could see all of one beautiful breast.

"How much are they?" she asked.

"I... Uh... What? Tomatoes? Ten a pound."

She straightened up. "I'll take a pound."

He picked a paper bag off the counter and snapped it open.

"You never know what a... somebody... like that will do.

Let me pick them out."

She leaned over and picked out the tomatoes and handed them to him. He watched her avidly, caressing the smooth skin of the tomatoes with his fingers. The asthmatic whistle of his breath became more noticeable.

"They say he was hanging around the station when they came home Sunday night," she said.

"Mrs. Mattison?"

He knew that there was more than a pound in the bag already, but he didn't want to stop her.

"And her little girl. They passed right in front of him, and he looked at them just like he looks at every... every woman. Is that a pound?"

He turned to the scales reluctantly as she straightened up. He pulled three tomatoes out of the bag and read the scales. A little over a pound. He put the extra tomatoes back in the crate, brushing up against her arm as he did so.

"How's Joe?"

"Same as ever. He's got a job in Bridgeton now. Comes home weekends."

"That so?"

"Kind of hard to keep my eye on him any more," she said playfully.

"Guess he's the one that should do the worryin'." He looked at her boldly, and she smiled.

"Two pounds of sugar," she said.

He had to go behind the counter for that.

"Can of evaporated milk while you're there," she said.

He got it.

"And a pound of butter. And that's all."

He weighed out the butter and very obviously gave her an extra dab.

"You'll go broke if you keep that up," she said laughing.

"For a good customer, nothing is too good," he said, imitating a Jew.

They both laughed. He came out from behind the counter and put everything in a big bag. He wanted to be in front of the counter when she went through the door, so that he could get a good look. She put her hand in her purse and looked at him questioningly.

"Seventy-one," he said.

She handed him a dollar. Damn it; he'd have to go behind the counter anyway to make change.

"Just the same," she said, "they ought to run him out of town, even if they can't prove anything."

"Johnny? Has anyone seen him?"

"Nobody's seen him since night before last, except maybe that poor little girl."

He rang up seventy-one cents on the cash register, and walked all the way around the counter to give her the change.

"Course, that doesn't prove anything," he said, handing her the change. Almie turned to go.

Two women were standing in the doorway talking. They were blocking off the sunlight. He wanted to make Almie wait until they moved, so that the sun would shine through without obstruction. He cast around in his mind desperately for something to say..

"Say, is it true that the Tobin boy is back in town?" he asked knowing perfectly well that he was.

Almie stopped and turned. "Didn't you know that?" she said. I saw him yesterday on the street talking with that Eileen Comfort."

"That so? Hmm.. Didn't take him long, did it." He knew what Almie's reaction would be to that.

She tossed her head. "If you ask me, it didn't take her long, although I can't say that I admire her taste."

"He's quite a handsome fellow... that is, they say he is."

"Handsome! He's got a face like a child. Just like a child."

"But he's built pretty well." Mr. Ayres was chuckling inwardly.

"Well, yes, he is. But they say that sort of... people are pretty strong anyway."

"What sort?"

"Crazy."

"He's all right now, isn't he?"

"Well," she said, "if you ask me..."

One of the women had moved away, and the other was coming in. Almie looked around and didn't finish.

"Goodbye, Mr. Ayres," she said sweetly.

"Good morning, Mrs. Tobin," Mr. Ayres said, his eyes following Almie through the door.

With a professional eye Mary Tobin surveyed the rows of fruit and vegetables in front of the counter. Then for some time she studied the price tags on the shelves of canned goods behind the counter, although she had been buying here long enough to know the prices by heart. Several times she sighed heavily.

Here was a peculiar case, Mr. Ayres thought. A woman who had lost her husband while she was still young, who had never remarried, and against whom there had never been a breath of scandal. She was still pretty, too, in the face at least. She was too short, of course, and too plump -- although some people liked them that way -- but her face was fresh and sweet, sort of angelic and young looking. She could still give a man a good time.

"What can I do for you this morning, Mrs. Tobin?" Mr. Ayres spoke softly, remembering the tragedy.

"Well, I didn't really intend to do any shopping, but now that I'm here... to tell the truth, I thought you might be able to tell me more about that... awful thing that happened last night... that little girl."

Mr. Ayres cleared his throat, holding the back of his hand across his mouth.

"And I'll want a few things, of course," Mrs. Tobin added timidly.

"Not last night; yesterday afternoon, Mrs. Tobin."

"Yes, that's right. I'd forgotten. I heard about it last night. It was such a shock."

Mrs. Tobin seemed very nervous.

"Very sad thing," Mr. Ayres said soberly.

Mary Tobin shuddered, her gentle face painfully strained. "I can't think... I don't understand... how anyone... even a... how anyone could do such a thing."

Again Mr. Ayres went on record. "The worst crime Keton has ever had."

"But who could have done such a thing?"

Mr. Ayres shrugged his shoulders. "To the mother I suppose there is no criminal, only the crime, only the sorrow that has come to her."

His face flushed with pleasure at his own eloquence. He would have to remember that one. Damn it, he should have been a poet.

"I pity her with all my heart," Mrs. Tobin burst out. Real feeling showed in her voice and in her eyes.

"Amen," said Mr. Ayres.

"Has... anyone been found out... been accused yet?" Mrs. Tobin looked at him sharply.

"Well, most everybody's convinced it was Jonnny Kinney."

There was a long silence.

Mrs. Tobin said, "Do... you... think Johnny could have done it?"

"When you stop to think of it, Mrs. Tobin, there's nobody else that your mind turns to."

"And Johnny hasn't been seen since the night before the... crime," Mr. Ayres said. "Not that that proves anything."

Mrs. Tobin shook her head. She picked up one of the tomatoes and looked at it carefully, turning it over and over on the tips of her fingers.

"Johnny," Mr. Ayres continued, "was hanging around the station Sunday night when they got off the train."

"Oh, were they on a trip?"

"Yes. They came home on the same train that your son did."

Mrs. Tobin gave a little start.

"Your boy dropped in to see me yesterday afternoon. He saw my brother on the train -- he's a conductor -- and he dropped in to tell me about it."

"But that was quite late in the day; he didn't get up until late."

"About three."

"Did... he stay long?"

"Just a minute. Guess I was busy and we didn't have time to talk."

Mrs. Tobin put the tomato back in the crate.

"They're awfully good tomatoes for this time of year, Mrs. Tobin."

"Yes. They look very nice."

"He's a fine looking boy. I didn't recognize him at first."

"He isn't very well. He's been ill for a long time now, but I'm hoping that the air and rest will do him good."

Mr. Ayres clucked sympathetically. "Been to college, hasn't he?"

"Yes," Mrs. Tobin said. "How much -- "

"Just graduate?"

"No. He was too... ill to finish."

Mr. Ayres blasted the air with a rasping cough.

"Nervous breakdown?" he wheezed.

Mrs. Tobin nodded, nervously picking up another tomato.

"It happens to a lot of them," he said. "A lot of them. They study too hard. It's a hard grind, they say. 'Course I wouldn't know, not havin' had the experience, but it's too hard for some of them. Ten a pound," he added, catching her eye. "And they're about the best we've had since last summer."

"I'll take two pounds. Nice ones."

Mr. Ayres picked out the tomatoes, put them in a bag and weighed them.

"Been away a long time, hasn't he?" he said casually.

"It seems like a long time to me. But I suppose it would to a mother."

He didn't press the point. Mrs. Tobin paid him and went out. Mr. Ayres dug his hand into the pocket of his white apron and scratched himself thoughtfully. "Wouldn't mind -- he was seized with a fit of coughing, and he luxuriously indulged

the convulsion.

Before the morning was over, Mr. Ayres had a fairly comprehensive mastery of the situation; he was confident and very much at ease no matter who his customer was and no matter how many were in the store at one time. He had the satisfaction frequently of divulging information and just as frequently of receiving it and keeping his informer ignorant of the fact that the particular morsel was news to him. And he found it more effective to call the little girl by her first name: "Little Mary Mattison," he would say, although it was not until someone had mentioned it that he remembered the girl's first name.

He learned nearly all the facts of the case. He learned that the state authorities had been called in and were making a careful, but so far fruitless, investigation; two state troopers and the District Attorney. Four or five men had volunteered to look for Jonnny Kinney and to bring him in for questioning. (The idea of questioning Johnny was the subject of some sarcasm by Mr. Ayres, with which his customers were perfectly in accord.) No one else was suspected; it must have been Johnny. He learned that the funeral was to be Friday morning and that Fred Mattison, the father, had come home yesterday on the four o'clock train. Both parents were considerably broken up. After all, an only child and all that; and there were pointed remarks from the women and point-blank statements from the men to the effect that it would be dangerous for her for physical reasons, to have another baby.

There was no definite proof that it had been Johnny, and

the fact that he wasn't to be found was not very weighty evidence, considering that he often stayed away two and sometimes three whole days at a time. It was significant, however, that no one could be found who had seen him the day before or this morning, for usually someone would meet him trudging along the back roads, sometimes miles from town, sometimes quite near. But no one reported seeing him, and it looked as though he had crawled into some bush like a frightened dog and was hiding, perhaps only half sensing the enormity of his crime.

Art Hemenway, sixty-year old proprietor of Hemenway's restaurant, gleefully revealed to Mr. Ayres that Lawyer Burton had been questioned, concerning Johnny, early in the morning by the state troopers and the District Attorney. All three had been seen going into his office and coming out again a half hour later. Nobody knew what they had found out. "But you can bet they had him right by the --- " Art pointed significantly. Mr. Ayres would have liked to see the wily old lawyer being put on the carpet, but he wouldn't have been surprised to hear that the investigators had got the worst of it. He didn't believe that the Lawyer and Johnny Kinney were any relation, much as he would have liked to believe it. He did believe, though, and was not alone in his belief, that there were relations between Lawyer Burton and that secretary of his, Eileen Comfort, "The Comfort girl," as he called her. But that was another matter.

The afternoon slipped by without much news. No one had

yet seen Johnny, and the investigation was pretty much at a standstill. The scene of the crime had been combed thoroughly, and no clues had been found. The only hope now was that the half-wit would have some clue on him that would prove his guilt when he was found.

Mr. Ayres felt a little bit frightened as he closed his store for the night. It was six-thirty, still light, still fairly warm, with only a faint breath of chill air stirring from the north. A few cars were parked in town, and only a few people were walking or loitering on the sidewalks. Keton was quiet and peaceful, unchanged; there was nothing to suggest that it had been affected by the event which had occupied so much of Mr. Ayres' time and thought during the day. And this very passivity startled him when he came out of his store; there was a shocking incongruity here between the impression he had received during the day cloistered behind his counter and the impression he received when he stepped out on the sidewalk.

For a moment he had a feeling of unreality, as though he had suddenly stepped off into a dream or as though he had wakened from a deep sleep in which the whole day had passed as a dream. The click of the lock under the key seemed to take him from one world to another, out of a dream into wakefulness, and as he took his first step toward home it seemed like the beginning of a new day, a new phase entirely disconnected from all that had passed during the previous ten hours. And as he walked he couldn't shake off the sense that each step he took

was not a continuation of the day but a new advance that was taking him farther and farther away from his starting point. He was like a man who had just climbed a hill and had turned around to go back, and after taking a few downward steps finds that he is descending on the opposite side.

Besides this feeling of strangeness and newness, or perhaps because of it, he felt frightened. There was nothing tangible he could call to mind and say of it, this is what frightens me, that's what scares me. If that were possible, he would face it and perhaps even bluff it out of existence. But there was only the increasing feeling of uneasiness that was gradually turning to dread, and he couldn't for the life of him name what it was he feared. The scenes and impressions of the day kept recurring to his mind, coming, it seemed, from some day long past, yet presenting themselves with a startling clarity. He had crossed the street at the postoffice, climbed the short hill past the Congregational Church and turned right down the long shaded street that formed the east arm of the cross and that would bring him, almost a mile farther down, to his own neat little house, only a few minutes walk from the Mattisons. He walked on the right side of the street; there was no sidewalk. The day's events unrolled themselves in his mind like a silent film. Almie Borden's face, pretty but somehow vacant and forceless; her sparkling blue eyes in a lively dance from place to place and suddenly resting full of meaning, questing, asking, painfully direct and unashamed; her hips and thighs, full but not heavy, moveable and alive;

her breast, a breastless white, glistening, full and palpitating. In one fleeting instant he saw her breasts as they had been when she was younger, just beginning to fill out, small and rebellious like the chubby clenched fists of a baby, pushing wistfully and with a tender pride against the caging mesh of her dress. He shoved the thought angrily out of existence. It was hard to believe that she had children, she seemed so far from the mother type. One was nine, tall, thin, and gawky, ugly as sin, with a mottled red birthmark that covered the whole left side of her face. The other was six, a little tomboy with braided brown hair and a snub nose, who continually made life miserable for anybody who lived in her vicinity, with her wild whooping and her spectacular disregard for her own life and the property of others. Mr. Ayres detested them both; an ugly girl was to him one of nature's most crying shames. How sweet and how completely feminine Almie had been when she was a girl. He remembered with remarkable vividness how one day twenty years ago she had wandered into the store, looking around with comical seriousness for something she wanted to buy, he couldn't remember what. She was seven, white and sweet, with calm blue eyes, wise beyond their years.

"How much?" she had said as he handed it to her, what it was he couldn't recall.

"A kiss."

She had given him a sidelong look that made her seem more like a woman than a child and sent a cold chill up his back for fear that she had looked with her child-wise eyes into the

very core of his soul. She held her head back without pursing her lips. He bent down and pressed his lips against her mouth, holding her there until she struggled free. Then she held out her hand for whatever it was she had bought with her kiss and he had handed it to her, tempted and yet afraid to ask for another.

He wondered if Almie remembered that incident or if twenty years had taken it from her mind. Then suddenly the disquietude, the restlessness, the fear that had been haunting him since he left the store, all came to a point in his mind, blotted the color from his face, and left him abruptly weak-kneed and sick to his stomach. He faltered as he walked, staggered and brushed against a small tree growing near the road; but he kept on walking, a little more slowly. He felt as though he had had a heart attack; in fact, he was almost convinced for the moment that such was the case. But these thoughts and fears that were racing around through his mind, they were also real and couldn't be dismissed by calling his sudden spell a heart attack. They had to be faced; the attack was over, but they were still there, clamoring to his mind for attention. He tried to hurry his pace, looking steadily down at the road, trying to concentrate, trying to concentrate on everything, anything, except that one hard burning core of fear that bored into the center of his mind. And for some time it seemed that he had a power over his mind, a control that he'd never had before, the power of excluding from his mind an urgent thought, a clamorous, vociferous idea

that wanted to be considered. He walked toward home.

Outside his house he even paused to take notice of his lawn, to remark mentally that it was badly in need of rolling this spring, and that there were several sunken spots that needed filling in. He noticed, too, the first hint of green creeping up under the dead stems of last year's grass. There were buds on the honeysuckle vines that clung to wires on the north side of the front porch and which a little later would cast their shade over almost half of the porch. The two lilac trees that grew on the front lawn, one on each side of the center walk that led to the porch, were ready to burst into bloom. The flower beds under the eaves of the porch needed cleaning out; they were full of dead leaves. He'd have to get after them next Sunday or some evening before that and clean them all up and roll the lawn. Better put a little grass seed on some of the thin spots too. His knees almost buckled under him as he climbed the front steps. His hands were so wet that they slipped as he tried to turn the smooth marble knob of the door, and he had to use his handkerchief to open it.

"That you, Lew?" his wife called from the kitchen.

"Yes," he said, but he had to say it again because only a feeble wheeze came out the first time.

"I'm in the kitchen," she said.

He plodded wearily into the kitchen. She had her back turned to him and was spreading icing on a cake. He kissed her on the cheek and went to the sink to wash his hands..

"What's new?" his wife asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing new."

"Tired?"

"Yes."

"Hungry?"

"Yes," he said, and then almost vomited into the sink when he thought of food. He hastily took a drink of water from the faucet without using a glass.

"Why, Lew! The idea!"

He smothered his face in a towel, wiping his mouth. Then he stood before the mirror and combed his thin hair. Through the mirror he saw his wife still stroking the cake with the flat side of a knife, making flourishes and then pausing to study the effect. With a sudden shock he saw his own face in the mirror, white, pasty, strange looking, almost as though he were looking at a corpse, his own dead body. He looked into the mirror curiously, studying the details of the face as though he were an artist studying a painting. His lips were twitching at the corner, and it was only when he looked into the mirror that he became aware of it. His high smooth white forehead seemed to be the most prominent part of his features and seemed to bulge out, to shine and glisten in the mirror like a massive billiard ball. Strange how coldly and dispassionately he could look at himself at a moment like this..

"What ails you, Lew? Are you sick or somethin'?"

He gave a guilty start.

"No," he said, taking a few quick strokes with the comb,

THE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF BOSTON

The history of the city of Boston is a story of growth and resilience. From its founding as a small fishing village, it has become one of the most important cities in the United States. The city's location on a natural harbor made it a center of trade and commerce. Over the centuries, it has been a hub of innovation and industry. The city's rich cultural heritage is reflected in its many museums, theaters, and historic sites. Boston's role in the American Revolution and its subsequent development as a major financial center are well-documented. The city's diverse population and commitment to education and research have made it a global leader in many fields. Today, Boston continues to thrive as a vibrant and dynamic city, with a strong sense of community and a bright future ahead.

"Just combing my hair.

"Watcha so pale about then?"

She had put the cake under a cover and was wiping off the oilcloth table-top, eying her husband mistrustfully during the process. He held the comb under the hot water faucet, shook it out, and then dried it on the towel.

"Had a spell of coughing just before closing time and it kinda made me sick to the stomach."

It was an easy lie; he had used it before.

"Then you ain't hungry after all.!"

"Nope.!"

"And I've gone and got a nice boiled dinner for you, and chocolate cake."

"Maybe later," he said.

He got out of the kitchen as quickly as he could, and went out on the front porch where he lay down in the swing. Now face it, he said to himself, his lips twitching slightly as though ready and willing to form the thought into words. She'll let me alone for twenty minutes, and then she'll be out here. (He was thinking of his wife.) What's got you? God, I'm sick. But he couldn't face it.

The way he felt now made him think of a dream that he used to have, which used to keep recurring frequently, sometimes three or four nights in a row, but which in the last few months had not troubled him. It was a vision of a night-marish little man with a sallow, hairless head, who was crawling up out of a lake, inching his dwarfed body toward the shore,

and thrusting his head forward ever closer and closer toward the boy. The boy, who in his dream Mr. Ayres somehow identified with himself, held a small, double-headed hammer in his hand, with which he kept threatening the oncoming apparition and at the same time slowly retreating. The retreat of the boy and the advance of the man kept on until at last the fringe of the woods which bordered the lake halted the lad's backward walk, and he had to stand his ground. He stood on a log while the shiny bald head and the popeyes came closer and closer, and he brought his hammer down two or three times in a warning gesture to show his pursuer what would happen. All the time in his dream, Mr. Ayres kept feeling the emotions of fear and hate that were coursing through the mind of the little boy, until toward the end he actually became the boy and stood on the log waving his hammer, threatening, aggressive and yet full of fear. The figure was only a few feet from the log on which he was standing, and the body seemed to melt away; he could see nothing but the bald head, somehow terribly repulsive. And then suddenly he was pounding away with his hammer on the head, beating it with all his might, his arm rising and falling in a mechanical persistent rhythm; and no matter how hard he pounded, the head still seemed to threaten, no longer advancing but still threatening, still terribly repulsive. The steady beat beat of his hammer seemed to have no effect, and now the head was smiling horribly at him, and inch by inch getting closer. His arm was getting tired, but still the hammer seemed to rise and fall of its own accord

always landing solidly on the sniny top of the head and having no more effect than as if the head were ivory and the hammer were a feather.

The dream never got any further; it didn't seem to end, it just persisted; and there was no victory for either side.

The way he felt now reminded him of the dream. In the back of his mind there was a persistent beat beat as of a hammer rising and falling, only it wasn't a hammer; it was a phrase pounding at his consciousness almost audibly, silent and then loud, ebbing and flowing; first it was there and then it wasn't, there and then gone. There, it was in his mind now, "The truth will out," now it's gone. Back again, "The truth will out", and now gone. He had read it somewhere and it had stuck in his mind, or he had heard someone say it. "The truth will out," like the beat of the hammer, and having no effect, no meaning. His own head ached and throbbed with the steady beat of the phrase, and his eyes burned so with the pain that he had to close them. But it was worse with his eyes closed; he immediately felt himself slipping into a doze, and the world seemed to drop out from under him; his head swam in smothering, delirious pain. Twice or three times he forced himself awake only to fall back again into the vivid nightmarish pit into which his dozing mind was dragging him. And finally he slept.

A few minutes later the front door opened and Mrs. Ayres stood in the doorway. Through the gathering dusk she saw

the outline of her husband's figure on the swing.

"Lew," she called softly.

No answer.

She went back inside and appeared a moment later with a blanket which she carefully spread over the sleeping man. Then she re-entered the house, closing the door quietly. She didn't feel worried about her husband; every so often an asthmatic attack, combined with a busy or exciting day, would leave him too low and tired for supper. Usually in about an hour or so he would be all right. In the meantime the supper would save, and she could darn some socks.

Twenty minutes later Mr. Ayres sat bolt upright in the swing with a suddenness that made the springs and hinges squeak and complain, and which drained the blood from his face and left his heart palpitating in a vacuum. He had heard footsteps coming nearer and nearer his house, and though whoever it was was still at least two blocks away the barely perceptible sound had roused Mr. Ayres as effectively as a pail of cold water. Not long before, his wife had opened the door, called to him, covered him with a blanket, and closed the door; and he had not stirred from his sleep. Now the soft click of a shoe on the flagstone almost a quarter of a mile away, has roused him. And yet he was asleep, no doubt about that. His mind, even when he is unconscious, has distinguished for him between what he need not fear and what he must. He wonders, too, now he could have slept at all, wondering in his mind

had led him into the retreat of slumber as a defense against the army of accusing thoughts which had been threatening him.

He strained hard against the darkness to see who was approaching. He could make out that it was a man, a rather tall man. Did he have on a uniform? District Attorney Conway was tall.. The man passed under a streetlight, the only one in the vicinity, and Mr. Ayres saw that he was hatless. Something about the breadth of the shoulders and the set of his head looked familiar. Mr. Ayres began to breathe a little easier. Still it was a strange time to be visiting, right at supper time; but probably it was past supper time now -- Mr. Ayres had lost track of time while he was sleeping.

The figure turned abruptly into Mr. Ayres' walk and swung up toward the porch. Mr. Ayres sat still, in the middle of the sofa, straining his eyes to recognize the visitor. He came up the stairs slowly and stood for a moment on the top. Still Mr. Ayres said nothing. The visitor walked toward the door, his hand extended as though to ring the bell. He turned in the middle of the porch; not until he spoke did Mr. Ayres recognize him.

"Good evening, Mr. Ayres."

It was Albert Comfort. Mr. Ayres was startled at his sudden turning, and then he realized that he had made a perfect silhouette against the light coming through the windows from inside. The fellow must have seen him sitting there the moment he turned to come up the walk, and he had pretended not to see him until the last minute. Mr. Ayres felt

uncomfortable.

"Hello," he said. "Lookin' for me."

"Yes," Albert said. "I wanted to have a talk with you if you can spare the time."

He stepped over and sat down on the railing in front of the swing, facing Mr. Ayres. Mr. Ayres couldn't see his visitor's face very well, and he was uncomfortably aware that his own showed up all too plainly in the light from the window.

"Sit down here, if you like," he said, making room on the couch. Albert refused.

"Comfortable here," he said. "Not staying long anyway."

Mr. Ayres had half a mind to tell him that he hadn't eaten supper yet, but he decided not to, for fear that his visitor might snatch a suspicion of why he hadn't eaten. He didn't like the way Albert was looking at him; he'd never taken much to Albert anyway... too sour; too smart; cynical. Had to give him credit, though; knew a lot. What in hell was he staring at. The swing squeaked occasionally as it moved, and Mr. Ayres held his feet flat on the floor to keep it from moving. There was a loose chain on the swing, hanging down against one of the supporting chains; Mr. Ayres thought he heard it jingle in a sort of rhythm and suddenly became aware that the beat of his heart was being transferred through the swing and was causing the chain to vibrate. He sat up straight so that no part of his body except his seat was touching the swing. The jingle of the chain stopped. He shot a quick glance at his visitor and thought he caught the flash of his

smile in the dark. What did the fool want? Was he trying to make sport of him? Did he know something? Mr. Ayres felt his heart sink. He could feel Albert's eyes boring into him; he had been staring at him ever since he had arrived.

Mr. Ayres spoke, almost savagely. "What do you want?"

Again he thought he caught a glimpse of a smile on the face of his visitor.

"You don't look very well, Mr. Ayres."

There was an oiliness in his voice, something sarcastic, a half-hidden insinuation. Was it that, or was he imagining things? This Comfort was a funny fellow; you never knew what he was thinking. Had a grudge against the world and didn't care who knew it.

"Asthma," Mr. Ayres said. "Asthma and hard work."

"And excitement? Does that botner it?"

"Well, sometimes. But not so much as over working."

"Pretty hard day today," Albert said. "Lot of people in town."

"'Twas," said Mr. Ayres. "'Twas a hard day. Kept me steppin'. Somebody in the store most all the time. Don't think I sat down more'n twice durin' the day."

There was a short silence.

"A day like that gets my asthma," Mr. Ayres said.

"I've heard that excitement does the same thing," Albert persisted.

"Well, mebbe so. Hadn't noticed it. Course there was some excitement round the store today. Bound to be. Folks

talk about a thing like that; gotta expect it in my position."

"Yours is a rather unusual situation, Mr. Ayres."

Mr. Ayres started in spite of himself. It had been spoken in a tone that made no attempt to hide a double meaning. There was malice, there was a hint, there was a sneer. Mr. Ayres had tried to smile genially, but a surge of panic froze the smile on his lips; he could feel his teeth sticking dry against his parted lips. He gulped convulsively and felt a burning pain in his throat. Bursting on the silence came the sound of the town clock tolling the hour, louder it seemed than he had ever heard it before.

"...Six, seven, eight."

"Eight?" he said aloud. He thought he had counted wrong. His voice, to his own ears, sounded hoarse, hardly more than a wheeze.

He heard Albert speaking. "I thought you might be able to give me some information, Mr. Ayres. You see, the paper's coming out tomorrow night, and I want to get the story written up. You probably know more about it than anyone else I might be able to talk to."

He stopped and then added in a peculiar manner, "In your unusual situation."

But by this time Mr. Ayres had a grip on himself; the spasm had passed. After all, what had he to fear? He was letting his imagination run away with him. Nobody in the world knew what he had been thinking this evening, what thought had struck him as he was walking home tonight and

blanched his soul with terror. No one knew that thought or that fear, and it was that thought alone which made him guilty. Why should he fear the youth before him, a boy, a mere boy, being nasty because nastiness and insinuation was his natural bent in life. He knew nothing.

Almost at ease, Mr. Ayres told what he knew of the case, what he had heard and what he surmised. He spoke with unusual energy and venemence, and with an obvious attempt to be perfectly frank and truthful. Albert listened with considerable interest, his eyes never leaving the countenance of the man before him. He said nothing until Mr. Ayres had finished and had been silent for some moments.

Finally, Albert said softly, "So you think Johnny Kinney did it."

Mr. Ayres puzzled for a minute, his head bent.

"Well," he said, "I've always thought that Johnny was a harmless enough lad without much leaning to wickedness; but right now appearances are all against him."

Mr. Ayres felt his assurance almost completely restored. He even ventured to look up at his visitor, trying to make out the expression on his face obscured by the shadow of the vines behind him. Again it seemed to him that Albert was smiling sardonically.

With more boldness than he had ever credited himself with, Mr. Ayres spoke again. "Who else could have done it?"

It was a purely rhetorical question; he didn't expect an answer. Mr. Ayres considered the interview over. He mulled

over in his mind the best way to get rid of his visitor. Should he be abrupt or should he taper it off gradually, throwing out a few hints until the fellow caught on that he wasn't wanted. He could say something like, "Guess I oughta get a little supper under my belt", or "Anything else you want to know just drop in at the store."

And then Albert's voice, "Why you might have done it Mr. Ayres."

The words struck him like a blow in the head, and he was so stunned that the words which followed hardly made an impression.

"-- Or I, or anybody, any man, for that matter. It doesn't have to be some special type of creature to commit a crime like that."

Mr. Ayres heard the loose chain clinking again, and it sounded as though the metallic chink were coming from a great distance; it sounded like the rapid fire beat of a pistol hammer clinking down on unloaded chambers, or like a sledge hammer driving a chisel into a rock, the beat of the hammer head against the chisel being immeasurably stepped up in rapidity. He wondered what was shaking the chain into motion, and realized suddenly that he was trembling. And Albert's voice coming from a distance.

"... ordinary men don't do such things -- that's what people say -- but there's no such thing as an ordinary man.. Everybody has something about him that's not ordinary, that's not natural; something abnormal, maybe sometimes even criminal

or what may lead to crime. Don't you feel that way? Don't you feel that even you yourself might have been guilty of a crime another man has committed, only you didn't do it, he did? If we're honest with ourselves, most of us would admit that we could have been guilty of almost any crime, murder, arson, rape, treason -- anything -- even some particular thing, crime, like the little Mattison girl. Who knows? My opinion is that the man who did it is as ordinary as you and I in every way except one, and that one abnormality... well..."

He stopped speaking, and looked for some time directly at Mr. Ayres, who sat speechless, his head bent down so that his chin almost rested on his chest. For a time the only sound was the gentle tinkling of the loose chain. Then abruptly Albert stood up and left without saying a word.

A few minutes later Mr. Ayres became aware that he was shivering violently. He wrapped the blanket around him and went into the house. Mrs. Ayres took one look at him and made him go to bed, pressing him with hot packs and hot water bottles to make him stop his shivering. Then she called Joe Lucas on the telephone, an old man who helped him in the store on busy days, and told him to take charge of the store the next day, that Lew wouldn't be able to work.

VIII

Mr. Ayres remained in bed for the next two days, Thursday and part of Friday, his prostration due more to an overwhelming lassitude than to a specific illness. He felt weak; his muscles seemed to have turned to milk, and his body lay flaccid between the sheets, for the most part a mass of insensible flesh. He lay for long hours with his eyes wide open, looking straight up at the ceiling without blinking, or rolling his eyes from side to side without turning his head and always without winking. His face was very pale and his lips dry; his mouth was open always, and there was a continuous wheeze, almost a rattle as his chest leisurely rose and fell with his breathing. He lay like that for the better part of two days and two nights.

Mollie Ayres, worried -- but not by any means worried out of her usual calm -- watched him like a hawk and waited on him, efficiently, continuously, and tenderly, as though he were the orbit of her whole life and her every act must be subordinated to his wants. In the beginning he had forbade her to call a doctor, and she had conceded, albeit with some misgivings; but she was secretly determined to go against his wishes unless he showed a decided turn to the better in a very short time. In the meantime she hovered about him, fretting because he didn't make greater demands on her.

She was a big woman, at least a head taller than her husband, broad, stout, and even muscular. She weighed well over a hundred and fifty pounds and carried her weight with an amazing grace; she walked with an easy, swinging stride, and with a roll of the hips that gave her a peculiar machine-like grace, attracting a glance of admiration from men and of respect from women. Big and strong as she was, she had an animal-like rhythm in her movements that bespoke a singular harmony between muscles and mind. She was forty years old, and as ripe as a woman can very well be.

Mollie was apparently devoted to her husband, more so now, probably, than when they were married. At first she had ever so slightly despised him, although she never admitted it to herself; she had despised him for his physical shortcomings, and at the same time almost worshipped him for his mental and social superiority over her. But gradually her love turned to a mothering sort of affection for the ineffectual, chubby little grocer who seemed to grow more and more childlike every year. And now she tended him as she would tend a child, with no respect whatever for his manhood, no consideration for his pride; and as it happened Lew Ayres felt not the slightest incongruity in her treatment of him -- his manhood and his pride made no protest.

The observant onlooker, however, might have made from Mollie Ayres' assiduous devotion to her husband an interesting speculation concerning her sincerity. How much of this was sheer devotion and how much was a defensive action built up

to compensate for some inward guilt or some inward compulsion that, had she given it a direct and honest outlet, might have brought injury or shame to her husband or to herself. She was too much his opposite physically to take complete satisfaction from his embrace. She never admitted this to herself, and probably did not realize it, but subconsciously she must have felt that her passion might some day seek and find a more adequate outlet, a man nearer, like her, to the animal. And the guilt of that subconscious thought was atoned for by a clinging, cloying devotion to a husband who had never been a mate.

Lew Ayres' present illness puzzled Mollie. She had never seen him like this before, although she had often seen him ill or on the point of illness because of an attack of asthma. This was something else. Other than his paleness and the limp weakness of his body she could detect no symptoms; his temperature was normal; his breathing was regular and even except for the slight asthmatic rasp. But he lay in bed, allowing her to wash him and wait on him, speaking to her hardly a word, and as far as she could see making hardly a single movement. For a day and a half he lay that way, apparently without closing his eyes or without changing his expression; and then on Friday afternoon he got up as usual and went to the store. Although Mollie was puzzled, she made no effort to find an elucidation. She had heard her husband talking on the porch on the night he was taken ill. He had told her who it was when she asked him. She wondered what

the Comfort boy had wanted and what he had said, but Lew wouldn't tell her; she did not connect his illness with Albert's visit except in regard to time: they were coincident.

When Albert left Mr. Ayres so abruptly Wednesday night, he went directly to his desk in the press building and sat for an hour industriously jotting down notes. There were two or three other men working in the building, one or two of whom passed through the office occasionally while Albert was there. He paid no attention whatever to anyone; he sat bent over his rapidly moving pencil and a sheet of yellow paper, his brow furrowed, his face pale and drawn, and his eyes bright with a feverish, fanatical light.

After an hour of writing, he stopped abruptly and threw his pencil down on the desk. He tipped his chair back, bracing himself with his knees under the desk, and gazed dreamily off into space. The big sheet of yellow paper rested on the desk unnoticed, both sides covered with a fine but almost illegible scrawl. After a few minutes he got up, put on his hat, and started for the door. Halfway there he turned and came back for the sheet of notes, which he folded carefully and put into his pocket. Then he went out.

At nine-thirty of the same evening Eric Tobin was sitting alone in his living room, reading a book in front of a casually smouldering fire in the fireplace. His mother and Aunt Myra had left at about seven-thirty to pay a call on the

O'Connors, who lived a half mile up the street, and he and Cleone had been talking quietly during the last two hours, Cleone sewing on a housedress which she was making for herself, and Eric sprawling out in a chair on the opposite side of the fireplace from her, enjoying the warmth and the pleasant relaxation that came with it. A few minutes before, Cleone had gone to the sewing room so that she could use the sewing machine, and Eric had moved to the sofa with a book. He could hear the buzz of the sewing machine, and occasionally a sound from the kitchen as Mrs. Comfort moved about in there.

The day had been pleasant enough. He had got up late and spent what was left of the morning in the garden, cleaning out the leaves from the flower beds and rose bushes. He'd had a short talk with Tim Caldwell, the handy-man, who made no objection to Eric's working in the garden, since Mrs. Tobin usually took care of that herself anyway. In the afternoon he had taken the walk with Cleone. No one had talked much about the tragedy of the day before, except Tim, who, usually very taciturn, expatiated for several minutes on the punishment that should be meted out to such morons as Johnny Kinney. Eric didn't encourage him and he soon left off.

Eric sat looking at his book without turning a page. His thoughts at that moment were serious but far from somber. He had several times during the day thought wonderingly and apprehensively of the pace which his new life was setting for him, and he had conjectured whether or not he could keep up to it. At times it seemed to him that he had been plunged

suddenly into the midst of a mighty upheaval, an oceanic maelstrom that was striving to drag him into its orbit or to whirl him around and around until it succeeded in casting him off, helpless, on a tangent into some unknown and hopeless outer space. The course of events was a mighty course that reached out with tentacle-like hands to snare him into its influence, and he felt the pressing need to avoid them, to stay aloof for the sake of his own peace of mind. He wondered how long he could stay aloof. At times, too, during the day, he wondered how much of this confusion, this maelstrom, was the product of his own mind. After all, a single terrible blow had fallen, a single event in the life of the town that stood out above all other events; why then should he have the feeling that the world had suddenly shaken under him and was threatening to turn upside down; why should he get the impression that events were crowding him one on top of the other, snowing him under, dragging him out of his groove? And he had come to the conclusion that his mind was much at fault.

Still, he couldn't help feeling that his new life had become much more complex than he would have liked it to be. The death of the little Mattison girl seemed to him an unspeakable catastrophe, and every time his mind turned to it he was shaken with horror. And the mystery of it was more moving to him, more upsetting, than the brutality; the fact that some one had done it, and that some one remained unknown added an intangible accompaniment to the crime, that made itself felt

in Eric's mind over and beyond the brutal act, like an obtrusive organ accompaniment drowning out the voice of the singer. But from this event, dreadful as it was, he felt himself aloof or nearly so, for it touched merely on the fringes of his experience -- he had seen the little girl and her mother on the train as he was coming home, and thus for one moment the circle that inscribed their lives had touched and parted. Just so he had met, his life had touched, on the same day, Norrie, the conductor, brother of Mr. Ayres, and Jim the baggage man, the taxi-driver, and of course numbers of other people; if one of them should die tomorrow would it be to him a vital sorrow? No; fortunately life wasn't like that; we billiard balls rebound from each other and careen needlessly on into our own destined pocket, and how long another whom we have kissed in passing stays on the table is and must be a matter of little concern. The crime was horrible, but it was a crime of the outside world, not of his own inner world.

So Eric reasoned to himself, realizing half-consciously that he was arguing speciously for his own peace of mind, and half aware that the reasoning of his mind would in the final analysis have to give way as usual to the reasoning of his heart. But he was afraid to let anything touch him now, not yet; he must hold off for a while yet the subtle fingers of the world that were reaching for his heart.

The death of the little girl, and the mystery of it, made the world seem suddenly unreal or at least abnormal. What made the world complex, however, was the emotions aroused by

his contact with three new lives, and the demands that those three lives were making on him despite his short acquaintance with them. He felt with a sudden clear conviction that whatever the future might bring for him or whatever it might take away, he wanted Cleone to be part of that future; and just as clearly he felt that no matter what he wanted, somehow or other the twins, Eileen and Albert, were most certainly going to play a part in his future.

This conviction was so clear to him at that moment as he sat in front of the fireplace that he had the uncomfortable feeling of the presence of another person, as though Albert or Eileen had entered the room and were waiting to play their part in his life. He looked up quickly from his book to see if Cleone had returned from the sewing room, but even as he did so he heard the buzz of the sewing machine. The feeling persisted and he looked behind him. Nerves, he thought, turning his eyes back to the book. But as he turned his head he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye at the window on his left, and he sat bolt upright staring at the window. For the space of half a second he was looking into the eyes of Albert Comfort staring through the window from the outside, and then the face was gone. He jumped to his feet with an eerie feeling, half of dread and half of amusement. The vision had seemed only half real; Albert's eyes had seemed wide and staring, and his face had been half obscured by the feebleness of the light which was cast out into the shadows; it had seemed part of the shadows themselves. And Eric was amused at his immediate

tendency to give a supernatural interpretation to the face.

He walked quickly to the window, and shading his eyes with both hands looked out. He could see nothing but the driveway bordered by the tall evergreen hedge. An army could have been lurking in that hedge without being visible. Eric wanted to open the window and shout out to his friend, but then both Cleone and Mrs. Comfort might hear him and wonder. Half convinced that the face had been a figment of his imagination, Eric turned away from the window, and heard the sound of foot-steps on the porch.

Before the bell could be rung, Eric was out in the hall and had opened the door. Albert stood in the doorway and stuck his hand out preemptorily without saying a word, and Eric clasped it warmly, wondering at his own warmth as he did so.

"I saw you at the window," Eric said. "Come on in."

Albert came in, and while Eric was closing the door entered the living room and sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs beside the fireplace. Eric followed him and sat down on the davenport.

"Made a tour of inspection before I came in," Albert said. He offered no other explanation for his peculiar action.

He looked perfectly calm now; the feverish light had gone out of his eyes and there was a little color in his face, probably caused by his walk in the night air. He looked even a little less morose than usual. Eric noticed this with satisfaction.

"I was thinking of you just before I saw you," Eric said.

Albert went on speaking. "Saw my mother in the kitchen, sewing."

"She doesn't have to stay in the kitchen," Eric said hurriedly. "She has a room of her own."

Albert looked at him queerly. "Did you think I was concerned about her welfare," he asked.

Eric nodded, a little bit confused.

"Well, I wasn't. Who was that in the room in back of the kitchen? I saw a light in there, but I couldn't see inside."

"That's Cleone. My cousin. She's in the sewing room."

"Anybody else home?"

"My mother and my aunt are out for the evening."

Albert settled back in his chair with evident satisfaction.

"Good," he said. He sat still for several minutes, his hands clasped across his stomach and his feet stretched out in front of the fire. Eric studied him with a new interest. For the first time he knew that his friend was handsome, and he conjectured that it was Albert's mood which accounted for the revelation. Eric had never before seen him without a frown on his face or a look of disgruntled spite. Now as the flickering shadows cast by the fire played upon Albert's face, Eric saw that his thin lips were parted in a smile of satisfaction, as though he had just tasted a fine wine and was pleased at the savor. His forehead was clear, and his face was relaxed. The dynamic energy that usually played across his features, controlled by the hard set of the jaws and the

firm cynical curve of the lips, was no longer evident, or at least no longer on the surface. The wild, reckless spirit that moved him was slumbering.

For a moment Eric thought that Albert himself was going to sleep, but suddenly his guest burst out laughing. It was a happy chuckle, not loud but seemingly heartfelt. He looked at Eric, his eyes brimming with amusement and good feeling, and Eric smiled back at him, moved by his friend's good spirits and well enough acquainted by now with his peculiarities not to wonder at this sudden outburst.

"Life is a funny thing," Albert said between chuckles; "very, very, funny." He stopped laughing and looked seriously at Eric. "You'd be surprised how funny it is," he said.

Eric nodded in agreement, still smiling.

"In the first place," Albert continued, "I'm laughing at myself. If anyone had told me a couple of weeks ago that I'd have a friend today, I would have called him a liar."

He spoke softly, but so distinctly and precisely that Eric suspected him of delivering a prepared speech.

"But I have a friend," he continued. "And here I am sitting with him tete a tete, and enjoying it; and here I am on the point of making a revelation to him."

"All that is true, isn't it?" he asked, looking searchingly at Eric.

"Of course," Eric said. He shifted uneasily, disturbed by his visitor's earnestness.

"Oh, by the way," Albert said casually, looking down at

his folded hands and twirling his thumbs, "I waited for you all morning, expecting you to come down."

"Do you want to know why I didn't come?" Eric asked softly.

"Not necessarily. Just as you please."

"I decided that you weren't good for me."

"I thought that was it," Albert said, still looking at his hands.

There was an awkward pause. Eric wondered what his friend was thinking.

"Do you understand?" Eric asked, hoping that he would not have to explain.

"Yes," said Albert.

He looked glum now, like a little boy who had been chastened. Again Eric got the unpleasant impression that his visitor was putting on an act, that this was an attitude adopted for the moment, that he would wait the moment out in this attitude even though he knew what the next moment would bring.

"Then it's all over?" Albert said. "Come to nothing after all." This was the speech that was to go with his pose.

Eric was tempted to answer yes, just to prick the bubble of his conceit, but yes was not what Albert expected; and Eric was a little bit afraid of what the other man's reaction might be to an unexpected situation -- he had already experienced the violence of his friend's spontaneous reactions.

"No," Eric said, and bit his lip when he saw the self-satisfied smile appear on the other's face. He was going to continue, but vexation halted him.

"No?" Albert said impatiently, and he looked sharply at Eric.

Momentarily their eyes met, Albert's impatiently ruffled, and Eric's candidly accusing. Albert looked away in confusion, probably realizing that the keen eyes of his friend had been reading his thoughts.

"I've given it a lot of thought during the day," Eric continued, "and I think that if you really want me for a friend, there's no reason why it shouldn't be that way. I was afraid that... that we... our interests were so different we might become antagonistic, but it doesn't have to be that way."

"In other words you were beginning to feel some antagonism."

"In a way," Eric answered thoughtfully. "I felt that you were influencing me more than I cared to be influenced. You're very dominant, you know."

Albert laughed. "I know," he said. Then suddenly he became serious, speaking fervently but by an apparent effort holding himself relaxed in his chair.

"But look now," he said, "I'll change all that. Honestly, I will. For the sake of friendship. I don't want to lead you; you go your own way. I know how a friend should be treated." He stopped. "I know your condition, too," he added. "Your life should be quiet, keep yourself out of involvements, unemotional -- just the opposite of my way of living. Friendship is a give and take proposition, I realize that; and I really want to make a go of our friendship."

Eric couldn't see his face very distinctly in the shadows, but he couldn't shake off the uneasy suspicion that in spite of the apparent sincerity of his words Albert was still acting. On his lips there seemed to be a half-smile, perhaps of self-consciousness or shame, but the smile didn't match his words, which were seriously spoken, candid, and seemingly from the heart. There are some people too egotistical even to give themselves frankly and wholeheartedly to anyone or to any cause; their sincerest words, their most spontaneous actions are to some degree studied so that always there will be an integral part of themselves or their feelings withheld. Eric suspected that Albert was one of these. But perhaps at that moment he was as near to perfect sincerity as he ever would be, and one would have to give him credit for that.

"I don't see any reason --", Eric started, but he was interrupted.

"No, don't say that," Albert broke in. "There's plenty of reason why you shouldn't accept me for a friend. In the first place, you'll probably be the loser. You haven't anything to gain--"

"But why should friendship be based on gain?"

Albert brushed the question aside and went on. "You can't possibly gain anything. In the second place--" He paused as the sound of the sewing machine made itself heard in the room.

"In the second place, I'm not congenial enough to be a friend to anybody. But change all that, as I said; that's

possible you know. In the third place... but there's plenty of other reasons; why name them. You're about the only person, the only man I ever met that I didn't resent. You see I'm perfectly frank. I didn't feel instinctively with you, as I do with others, that we were in direct competition. That's the way I feel, you see; I can't help it -- but not with you. Inferiority complex is what it is, or something like that, and with you I don't feel inferior. Are you offended?"

Eric felt a pang of sympathy for the other man. "Of course not," he said. "Why should you feel inferior to me? I shouldn't expect you to. I think I'd despise you if you did."

"There, that's what I mean," Albert said, his head so low that his chin rested on his chest; and still the ghost of a smile lurked on his lips. "You're not the grasping, pushing kind. One doesn't feel that you're trying to do somebody else in the first chance that you get. You're almost a Christian, in the real sense of the word, not a church-going, religious Christian, but a live-and-let-live Christian."

"Oh, but I'm not," Eric said, embarrassed. "There are so many--"

Albert silenced him with a wave of his hand. "Don't be modest. I know you already. I knew you almost as soon as I saw you. I recognized that there was a goodness in you, in spite of -- well, skip that -- a real, fundamental goodness of soul. And you don't see that very often nowadays."

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a package of cigarettes. Deliberately and meditatively he picked one

out, offered the pack to Eric, who refused, and lit it. He took a long puff, inhaled it, and blew it out audibly through his lips. For some moments he sat silent, either profoundly engrossed in his own thoughts or profoundly content with the moment as it was.

There was no understanding the man, Eric thought. He was intelligent, even brilliant. Perhaps he was sincere, perhaps he was dishonest, but it was impossible to tell for sure. One quality, however, stood out glaringly above all his other attributes and faults, and that was his egotism. Here Eric understood him, without condemning him. His pride, his conceit, his ambition, were all jumbled up into one great ball of self-love. Without a doubt he was inordinately ambitious, and Eric surmised almost desperately so, with plans and dreams that must reach beyond the moral horizons of the ordinary man. And his conceit fostered and nourished this; his pride would not allow him to relinquish it and forced him to live up to it, to hold it, to build continually more stately mansions. Perhaps that was the secret of his bitterness, his cynicism; his present small estate was like a sore festering in the middle of an unhealthy welter of egotistic dreams. The slightest touch on this sore spot, even though it were only an imagined touch, shot the blood of pain and anger to his head and made him dangerous.

For the second time Eric thought of Albert's sister in connection with the peculiar disposition of her brother. All too frequently she must touch, perhaps purposely touch, that

festering pride which was so sensitive to any poke from the finger of coarseness if that coarseness was near enough home to compromise the character which he had assumed. Nothing hurts pride so much as being accused of sordidness, of lowness; and so sordidness must not be tolerated in one's self or in one's relative. Here was part, at least, of Albert's discord with his sister; not, Eric guessed, that he frowned on any kind of sin in the abstract, but merely on sin which, if apprehended, might be laid at or near his door.

And was his mother's lowly station, chosen evidently by preference rather than necessity, the reason for the discord there?

"No," Albert said. (He had evidently been thinking all this time along the same channel as he had started.) "No, you're a better man than I am, far better than I, in your peculiar way. But I don't feel any antagonism, I'm not jealous of you, because your way is different from mine. You are -- well, I don't know just what you are -- let's say that you're on the way to goodness, while I'm on the road to greatness. I'll never be as good as you, and you'll never be as great as I."

He said this in a matter of fact voice, with no intention, evidently, of boasting.

"That's why you'd make an ideal friend for any man, even for me, even though we're so different. Just because we're so different wouldn't be enough to cement a friendship; but because of your goodness, you become an understanding friend,

and a forgiving one. I suppose one could easily impose on you and get away with it." There was a trace of scorn in this last. "Couldn't they?"

"Yes, I suppose they could," Eric said.

"But you're strong underneath, aren't you. A core of steel in there somewhere."

Eric said, "You shouldn't sneer at your friends."

"No, that's right. I'm sorry. Excuse me. You will, won't you?" He stood up restlessly, and pulling back the fire screen, flipped his cigarette into the low-burning flames. "I was thinking of something else. Do you know why I came here tonight?"

"To see if we were still friends," Eric answered.

Albert turned and faced him, standing with his back to the fire and his hands behind his back. "Partly that. But you remember I said I was going to make a revelation? Well, that's the reason. I have something to tell you, that I want to tell you."

Eric waited, wondering.

"When will your cousin come back in? Will she come in here?"

"She probably will, but I don't know when."

"Well, this is between you and me. We'll talk about something else if she comes in. My mother never comes in here I suppose."

"Very seldom."

"Oh, by the way," Albert said. "Do you love your mother?"

"Yes," Eric said. "I do. It's not the obvious surface attachment, the demonstrative type; but there's a bond between us that's deeply rooted, I think, and strong."

"Strange thing, isn't it? I mean about our family. No love on either side. Never has been."

Eric shook his head. "I don't believe it."

"Well, it's true." And he dismissed the subject with a shrug of his shoulders. "But about this revelation. What do you think it's about." He seemed to be playing for time, but more likely he was puzzling over in his mind just how to approach the subject.

Eric was on the point of asking if it was about Eileen, but he changed his mind. "I haven't the slightest idea."

"You know about this Mattison kid, don't you? You heard about that. When I was outside your window there, I was going to pretend that I was Johnny Kinney, and give you a scare." He chuckled. "Then I thought maybe you didn't know about it. But anyway, if Johnny comes back to town they'll stick him in jail and pin the crime on him. That's pretty certain. Funny he doesn't come back, isn't it."

He seemed to be waiting for an answer, but Eric said nothing.

"Johnny didn't do it, you know," Albert said quietly.

Eric started with surprise, scanning his friend's face to see if he was serious. Albert was evidently in dead earnest.

"Do you know who did?"

Albert answered, enjoying his "revelation", "I've just

been talking with the murderer."

Eric felt himself go pale. What did he mean? Was he accusing him, Eric? Impossible. And yet last night he'd had that uneasy feeling that someone might connect him with the crime, through the coincidence of his arrival on the same night, on the same train.

"Surprised?" said Albert looking at him keenly.

"Whom do you mean?" Eric met his gaze directly, anger beginning to stir, and showing in his eyes.

For a moment Albert looked nonplussed. He stuttered a few unintelligible words, and then without warning he went off into gales of laughter, laughing whole-heartedly and with genuine amusement. He took a few steps forward and then eased himself in the chair he had been sitting in earlier. Just as suddenly as he had started, he stopped and scanned Eric's face anxiously. He sat quiet for a little while, regaining control.

"Don't be angry," he said. "You have no reason to be. I had no idea of implying -- who would have thought that I could have meant you! It never crossed my mind. It's so ridiculous. Confess now, you must have thought at some time or other that people might suspect even you. Wasn't that it? And then you thought just now that I meant you, that I suspected you."

Eric grinned shamefacedly and nodded.

"I'll be damned."

"It certainly sounded that way."

"But this isn't the only place I've been tonight. You're

not the only one I've talked to."

"How was I to know?"

Eric saw by his friend's face that a disquieting thought had struck him. His brow wrinkled and a cloud of doubt settled over his features. All in a second he seemed to lose most of his self-confidence.

"You know," Albert said, "it's a good thing it turned out this way. I may be making an awful mistake. Maybe after all I'm barking up the wrong tree."

He seemed so depressed that Eric wondered how much store he set by his solution of the crime.

"Does it mean so much to you to solve the thing?" Eric asked. "Why should you bother with it?"

"Various reasons. But never mind that. I'll tell you the whole thing. I want you to help me." He settled back in his chair.

"In the first place," he said, after a few minutes of thought and speaking in a dispassionate, quiet voice, "people have the wrong idea about this affair. They've looked around immediately for the most obvious person to suspect, or --" He looked up with a quick smile at Eric. "-- or maybe the two or three most obvious persons, and made a choice of the most obvious. Why did they choose him, finally; why this particular man, Johnny Kinney?" He talked like an inspector summing up a case. "They chose him to fit their idea of the crime, an idea of senseless brutality, an idea that the crime was one of imbecility or idiocy, and that no one but an idiot, driven

by passion perhaps, but an idiot, understand, and not a sane man, could have done it. Naturally, if it's a crime of imbecility, all you have to do is find the imbecile, and in Johnny Kinney you have one made to order. And circumstances fit very nicely around this suspicion, just because, unfortunately for Johnny, he chooses last night to go on his wanderings. So the evidence is all against him from the beginning. Do you follow me?"

Eric nodded, interested not only in the story but in the new character that his friend had assumed.

Albert went on. "Probably ninety-nine percent of the people in town think that Johnny Kinney is the man, if they have any theory at all; and the state men probably think so too. You heard that the state inspector was working on it didn't you? Well, he is, but he and his men will probably leave pretty soon, figuring that they have the case solved. They'll leave it to the town authorities to nab Johnny."

Eric smiled as he thought of Keton's one-man police force.

"But Johnny Kinney isn't guilty," Albert continued. He's the victim of theory, a theory that's sometimes true, that often fits the facts, but which doesn't work for every particular crime."

"Their theory is," he said, "that the criminal is similar to his crime. Do you see what I mean? I'm not stating it very well. But take arson for example. That's a sneaky, despicable crime; and so any one who commits it will prove to be a sneaky, despicable person. Maybe he is, maybe he is,

that's true; but they believe that these qualities will reveal themselves to the inquiring eye, can be recognized. Therefore, when arson has been committed, keep your eye out for a sneaky character; he's a legitimate suspect. As soon as you hear of a criminal offense, small or big, you think immediately, don't you, of the people you know who might be guilty, who have shown themselves by their personality to be capable of such an offense. Now don't you?"

"That always happens," Albert went on. "It's instinctive. Do you follow me?"

Eric nodded and said, "And since this, this crime looks like the act of an imbecile, an imbecile must have done it; hence Johnny Kinney, who is the only, or at the least the most prominent, imbecile in town."

"Good," Albert said, nodding his head in mock approval. "That's just the way their minds function."

"It's very logical," Eric said.

"Of course it is, but here's something that proves a flaw in their logic. Just ask yourself -- do this honestly and frankly -- just ask yourself if it isn't possible, just faintly, remotely possible, that under a special set of circumstances -- very special, understand -- possible that you could have committed that crime yourself."

"And not only that crime," he cried in a burst of enthusiasm, "but any crime you ever heard of, no matter how bad it was. Now, think, wouldn't it be possible for you to have yielded to God knows what base instincts and.... and any crime, any crime at

all?"

Eric felt rather than saw the other man's eyes burning into him as though seeking the answer in his soul. He tried to concentrate on the question. Under a special set... any crime at all... murder, rape, arson. Rage might be the provoking influence. Passion, blind and desperate. Desire. Avarice. Or self protection, the natural instinctive unreasoning desire to live, at any cost. For some reason the dream which had occurred to him on his first night home came vividly to him now. He remembered the terrible vengeful fingernails scraping into the face of the girl looking into the cave. He remembered the lustful response of his own body to the whole scene, and especially he recalled the murderous rage that rose in him as the beautiful face that had awakened his desire was suddenly obliterated by the clutching fingernails.

"You can feel it," he heard Albert's voice saying. "Even you. Do you see what I mean now? Do you see?"

Albert was leaning over him shaking him by the shoulder. His voice was triumphant. "Do you see?"

His head cleared, and he nodded..

"Yes," he said. "You're right. About me, at least."

Albert released his shoulder and resumed his position back to the fire.

"Not only about you," Albert said. "It's true of everybody. If any man, every man, were to look into his heart, he would find there the same answer that you have found. Guilt. Potential crime."

"In that case every man is a potential criminal," Eric said, trying to get him into a corner.

"Yes, of course. Didn't you just prove it?"

Eric disregarded the question. "But something must keep them from realizing that potentiality. There must be a stability somewhere, a stabilizing force." He wanted to go on, but Albert interrupted him..

"I'm not concerned with that," he said loftily. "My point is that however dreadful a crime may be, think of the very worst, still you or I or any man might find a portion of our mind or soul ready to act it."

"But we don't do it."

"We haven't done it, as yet," Albert said.

"Something stops us."

"I tell you I'm not concerned with that," he cried. "I want to prove that, not Johnny Kinney only, but every man who was in this town at the time should be suspected."

"Because, you see," he added more quietly, "any man could have been guilty."

"All right," Eric said, "suppose I grant you that."

"Well, then," Albert breathed a sigh of relief, "then you have become an enlightened follower of reason." He laughed as though he had made a capital joke, but Eric guessed that his laughter was more a release from the tension he had built up within himself.

Albert continued. "Once you have that conviction firmly in mind, the next thing to do is to find what quirk in a man's

character -- any man's character -- could induce him to commit the crime in question."

"But then you get back to imbecility," Eric protested.

"Not at all," Albert said calmly. "You remember Jean Valjean in Les Miserables? He stole a loaf of bread to feed his sister and her children, and he landed in jail. Well, that's what I mean by a "quirk" in character: he had a great sympathetic love for his sister and his sister's children, and that love caused him to commit a crime. No, don't interrupt. The quirk itself, you understand, doesn't have to be criminal; it may be very noble. But then it bucks up against circumstances or convention. Or take for example a man who is brilliant, and fine in many other respects, but has an insatiable lust for power that keeps driving him on and leaves him always trying to conquer new fields. Some time or other he meets an obstruction -- let's say a person stands in his way -- he has to choose to follow his quirk and eliminate that obstruction, or give in to circumstances and give up his ambition. He chooses to brush the person out of his way."

Eric was startled by the other man's tone, which had suddenly grown confidential, quite personal. Could he be alluding to himself and Eileen? Was he making a prophecy? And he had put so much emphasis on the word person, as though to make it clear that it might be either a man or a woman, as though he didn't want his listener to think that he meant a man necessarily. But Albert was speaking again.

"There are other kinds of quirks. Let's take one lower

down on the scale. Some men have very estimable characters, but they are unfortunately afflicted, through no fault of their own, with some sort of perversion, little or big, a quirk. Now suppose a man, normal in every other respect, were afflicted with an inordinate love for little children, a love that normal contact with children or normal relations in other respects couldn't satisfy. Gradually this love grows and grows until he can hardly keep it within bounds. (He may or may not know that it is sexual in nature.) By accident an opportunity presents itself, a dark night, a little girl, and this all-consuming passion for just such little girls. Do you see?"

In spite of his revulsion at the thought, Eric knew that the other man was right, that such things were possible. He had not thought of such a possibility before in the case of the little Mattison girl, but it could be true. Who?

"Immediately you search your mind for a man capable of a thing like that." Albert seemed to be reading his mind. "But that's the trouble. He may never have revealed his little quirk of character; or perhaps only in little ways, noticeable only to the discerning eye, and there are very few such eyes around Keton."

"You know, though?"

"Yes, I know such a man."

"How do you know?"

"I have the discerning eye."

Eric listened to his friend laugh with a feeling of repulsion; he knew, though, that Albert was laughing at himself,

at his own boasting. His amused cackle nevertheless struck a jarring note in Eric's sensibilities.

"I've been to talk with him. Just a little while ago; before I came up here. I hinted around. I frightened him out of his wits. Do you know, I left him on the point of collapse. He showed his guilt; he showed it just as plainly..."

As Albert paused, Eric looked at him.. His face was troubled, and the doubt which had shown in his face previously that evening was again visible..

"Well?" Eric said.

For some time Albert, deep in thought, didn't answer. His brow was furrowed, and he kept rubbing the ends of his fingers on one hand between his thumb and index finger on the other as though he were trying to search out a lump or a bruise in the flesh..

Finally he spoke, his voice thoughtful and somewhat chastened. "Do you remember when I first mentioned this business to you, how you immediately thought that I suspected you?"

"Yes. I thought you were hinting..."

"I wasn't hinting. But when I saw that you thought I was, something else struck me."

"Just suppose," he continued after a pause, "just suppose that the particular quirk in your nature was such that you were capable of committing this crime." Eric's face must have showed his distaste for such a supposition, and Albert took a new tack. "Well, then, suppose that this fellow whom I suspect really knew, had realized at some time or other, that he was

capable of committing such a crime. Let's say he's really innocent, but after the death of the little girl gets around he suddenly realizes that but for the grace of God he might have been the guilty man. The only reason that he is innocent is that he and the opportunity didn't happen to coincide. And he realizes that. Now he accuses himself. He knows that in his heart, at least in his heart, he is guilty. Let's say he's an ordinary man of fairly decent character, outside of his quirk, and hence has the ordinary man's reaction to such a crime. He could, you know, in spite of his quirk; even if he did it, he might have that same reaction of horror and revulsion, after it's done."

"And then suddenly," Albert said, "he realized that in his heart he is guilty. What would his reaction be if someone accused him, or hinted that he was suspected?"

Albert was waiting for an answer, but Eric found himself unwilling to give one. He waited for Albert to answer the question himself, but what his answer was Eric was not yet to learn, for just at that moment Cleone entered through the nail door carrying the dress she had been working on over arm. She stopped, surprised at seeing a visitor.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know you had company."

Eric rose quickly. "This is Albert Comfort, Cleone," he said.

Cleone looked at him with frank curiosity, and Albert returned her stare, his face expressionless and his eyes cold.

"I was just talking with your mother," she said. "I went

in through the kitchen to show her my dress. She... thought it was very nice."

Eric detected a flush creeping into his friend's face, and the old sullen look came back, coupled with a spiteful sparkle in his eyes.

"It's interesting to know that she still thinks," he said.

"Come and sit down, Cleone," Eric said hurriedly. "It's warm here by the fire."

Cleone came over and stood in front of the davenport, facing Albert. Her eyes were flashing.

"I didn't think anyone could say such a nasty thing about his own mother," she said.

For a moment their eyes clashed.

"That was before you knew me," Albert said.

Cleone sat down in the davenport. Eric, restless, remained standing.

"This looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship," Albert said in a calm but sarcastic tone. "I'm sorry that I can't let it run its course further tonight, but I've got to be going."

"Stay awhile," said Eric. "My mother will be home soon. She'd be glad to see you."

"I've already been visiting too long, and before I came here I paid a visit to a friend of mine down town." He looked at Eric to see if he understood. "Mr. Ayres. You probably know him."

"Mr. Ayres, the grocery man?" said Eric, hardly believing

his ears.

"Yes," Albert said. "I'm very glad to have met you," he said turning to Cleone. "I hope you have good luck on your dress."

He crossed the room and Eric followed. As he was leaving he whispered, "Don't come to see me tomorrow; I'll be out. Or the day after."

Eric nodded.

Albert closed the door, and then suddenly opened it for a second. "Come Saturday," he said. "Saturday afternoon."

Eric stood thoughtfully by the door for a while, watching through the glass the retreating back of his friend until he was lost in the gloom of the long driveway. Then he turned back into the living room, wondering what Cleone was thinking about his friend. He sat in the chair beside the fireplace, and waited for some time in silence for Cleone to speak.

She had folded the dress carefully and placed it on her lap. She sat with her hands folded upon the dress, staring into the fire, which by now had burned down to a bed of coals. The light on the table across from where they were sitting was insufficient to illuminate that section of the room, and so they both sat in semi-obscurity. The glow from the fireplace gave a pleasantly mellow atmosphere to the room that called for quiet, unimpassioned thinking and low voices. There was a slight chill in the room; the fire needed more wood. But neither wished to break the spell produced by the low-burning fire for the sake of more heat.

Finally Cleone spoke, and Eric felt that her voice fitted precisely into the mood of the moment.

"I never met anyone like him before," she said. "He's almost unique. I think that if I knew him I would grow to hate him."

Eric smiled at her seriousness. Like all women, he thought, she forms an immediate judgement. Protestations in favor of his friend began mildly to form in his mind.

Cleone said, "Do you really like him? Do you really have a regard for him?"

He nodded.

She pondered. "Then he's really not what he seems to be? He's not nasty and mean and sarcastic; that's just on the surface?"

"Because," she continued, without waiting for an answer, "I know you couldn't respect anybody like that, unless there was something deeper, and finer." She wasn't trying to draw him out, or flatter him; she wasn't trying to change his opinion about Albert. She made the statement as a fact, on faith and without design.

He was troubled by this.

"I don't know," he said; I don't know."

A flicker of light came from the fireplace as a piece of bark on the outskirts of the smouldering heap burst into flame, and the smell of burning wood became more evident in the room.

"You do know, though," she said. "In your heart you know."

I've heard it in your voice at times when you've spoken about him, a respect and a -- regard for him. I've felt when I heard you that I'd like to know him, that he must be worth knowing. But tonight I was disappointed. He's different from what I expected. He must have shown his worst side."

"He did, believe me," Eric said, moved in spite of himself. You hurt him where he can't stand to be hurt. His pride. When you spoke of his mother."

"But I didn't intend to hurt him," she said.

"I know. And maybe he knew that too. Maybe all the while he was just putting on an act and wasn't hurt at all. But it's the same thing; it was a reflex action -- for him to say that mean thing about his mother, I mean -- a defense, whether you were attacking him or not."

"Maybe it's all a show with him, anyway, I don't know," he finished lamely.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's very sensitive," Eric said.

"But more than that."

"Well, I don't know. He's in a continual conflict. He has a mind, you know, a good mind. But he's ashamed of his feelings. He's ashamed to be sympathetic, or else he's decided that sympathy isn't a good way of life. That's probably it. And he's terrifically ambitious. I think he'd go to any lengths..."

"But why is he so... if he's so big... how is he big, intellectually?... if he's so big, how can he be so small, so

mean? Like tonight."

"I can't tell you exactly. It's the conflict that he's having with himself... against the world. That's the way he defends himself. You can't tell why about a thing like that; it just happens; it grows out of a man's character, and yet it isn't a part of his character, or shouldn't be. You'd understand him if you knew him better."

"But why...!" She stopped.

"I don't think he really hates his mother," Eric said. "Or his sister. Maybe it would be better if he did. I don't understand it, I don't know why he should pretend to, except for his pride. There must be something else, though."

"Why should his pride make him hate them?"

Eric himself was puzzled. "I can almost understand," he said. "I've tried to put myself in his place. Suppose I wanted to be great -- I don't know how great he wants to be, but perhaps beyond all bounds -- and suppose I think that the way to be great in this world is to be unfeeling, devoid of sympathy for others. But at the same time I have a soul that is tender, sensitive, and sympathetic, inordinately so -- you see, I'm putting myself in his place."

She smiled at him, and for a moment he thought she was mocking him. But he went on..

"I must fight against that, and I do, and I control it; I put it down and try to keep it down. But all the time there are people close to me whom I love, my mother and my sister. They're not worthy of my love, but somehow there is a weakness

in my character which makes me love them. A man with the greatness in him that I have should cast off things that are lower than he, he should despise them. And so in order to cast them off and not let them affect my life I have to hate them."

She was actually laughing now and he felt a little bit mortified. She noticed it.

"I'm not laughing at you," she said, suddenly sober. "It's your logic. You have it all figured out. It's so plain as you say it, but maybe you're all wrong. How can you be so logical about a human being?"

"And how do you explain his mother?" she asked, suddenly on a new tack.

"I don't know that," he said. "That's something else. I think my mother knows, but she never mentions it. But you're right about the logic. I may be all wrong; you can't be sure about -- a human being. But you see how it might be true, don't you? His mother is a hired servant, and what makes it all the worse, by choice; and his sister is... not well thought of, and doesn't seem to care. But he cares, intensely, about what people will say and do say about them because in a way they are part of him."

After a little while she admitted that he might be right.. She was almost convinced of it.

"Once he had a dog," Eric said. "He told me about it a few days ago when I was visiting him. He wanted to show me how he disciplined himself. It was a German Shepherd dog which he bought as a pup and brought up very painstakingly, always

with a certain idea in mind. That was a couple of years ago, just after he got out of the Navy. He trained it very carefully, teaching it to obey his slightest command, being very firm with it but at the same time very kind, and allowing himself to grow very fond of it. And naturally the dog grew very fond of him.

"For a whole year it followed him wherever he went, was with him practically all the time; they were inseparable. All the while, understand, he had a purpose in mind."

The heat from the fire had grown less and less; the coals were now barely alive. Cleone shivered slightly.

"He used to take it for long walks in the woods, and the dog would romp and play, always to come leaping back to him whenever he whistled; and it would follow at his heels when he went walking through town. He grew so fond of the dog that many times he thought that he couldn't go through with his plan after all, and when the time finally came, after a year of close friendship, the kind that is known only between a dog and a man, he kept postponing it from day to day, putting it off on some pretext or other, all the while growing lower and lower in his own estimation and growing more and more tenderly close to the dog. Until one day he got a grip on himself, as he said, and decided to go through with it. So he called the dog to him, and together they went out for a walk in the woods, a long walk, deep in the woods, miles from town and any place of habitation. He carried with him a long round iron bar about a half inch in diameter, pointed at one end and flattened

out at the other like the head of a railroad spike. And he had also a six-foot chain leash with a ring at one end and a clasp at the other. Both of these things he had been saving for over a year."

Eric paused and looked gloomily at the ashes of the fire. In the back of the house they heard Mrs. Comfort walking. After an evening of silence and loneliness, except for the short time that Cleone had visited her, she was going to bed.

"After a while he found a suitable spot, a fairly large clearing among the trees, where the ground was level and firm. He walked around the spot a few times to be sure that the ground was hard, and the dog went shooting off into the woods silently on the trail of a rabbit. He stuck the pointed end of the stake through the ring on the chain, and then with a big flat rock hammered the stake into the ground, leaving about three inches of it above the level of the dirt. Then he tested it, wrapping the chain around his hands and trying to pull the stake out of the ground. The head of the stake was big enough so that the ring wouldn't slip over it, and the ground was so firm and unyielding that try as he might he couldn't budge the stake. The dog came leaping at his whistle. He fastened the chain leash to its collar, a broad thick leather collar studded with brass, which he had bought only recently, and which fitted firmly, almost too firmly, about the dog's neck. Then he went home, leaving the dog there looking after him questioningly as though wondering when he would turn around and come back to him.

"It wasn't so bad the first night. Just once as he was lying in bed he thought he heard a dog howl, but it might not have been his dog; it might have been one on a distant farm.

"The next morning he went back to where he had chained the dog, carrying a little pail of water and a small can for the dog to drink from. He filled the can with water, shoved it within reaching distance and left. You can imagine how happy the dog was to see him, but Albert didn't stay long. That night he was quite certain that he heard the dog howling.

"He went back the next morning with more water. The dog was delirious with joy. He stayed a little longer this time, never touching the dog, standing just out of reach, while the big animal kept leaping ecstatically at him only to be jerked back with terrible force when he reached the end of his chain. He stayed for almost ten minutes, and as he left he was followed by pleading whines.

"Each day he did that for a long time, feeding it nothing but water. Each night he listened for the howls of the dog and heard, strong at first and then gradually growing weaker. And at every visit the dog was overjoyed to see him. Well, he kept that up, he never knew how long, until at last one morning he found the dog lying at the end of his chain with hardly a breath of life in him. His tail wagged feebly a couple of times, and his eyes rolled around in their sockets as he tried to watch his master. Albert stood there watching him all morning, facing him until he died. He went back in the afternoon with a shovel and dug a grave within the circle

which the dog had made as he ran around at the end of his leash."

Cleone sat silent for a long time, very pale, her eyes burning as she gazed at Eric. He too looked pale and a little sick. They were aroused by the sound of voices on the driveway. Their mothers were returning.

"And after that you still call him your friend," Cleone hissed.

Eric didn't answer. There was a look of pain on his face, as though he were enduring some sort of physical punishment.

"He ought to be shot," Cleone said fiercely. "He ought..." she was speechless with indignation.

"Just try to imagine how he must have suffered," Eric said through pale lips.

The outside door opened and the two women bustled into the hall. Cleone got up and turned her back on him.

IX

Next morning Eric awoke in an unusually light and joyful mood. His mind seemed, overnight, to have cast away all its burdens and perplexities of the day before like a dog shaking the water from his coat, and remained now calm, rested, and cheerful. He noted the change in himself with gladness, and for the first time since his return home confidence and quiet hope colored the landscape of his future. Perhaps in the depths of his sleep during the night his mind had been laboring over the doubts and problems which yesterday seemed to assail him from all sides, and finally all the restless, discordant thought molecules had been jostled into their proper place and had been settled comfortably and securely somewhere in the background of his mind.

His outstanding wish for the day was to spend it in the same elevated mood, to let his mind continue in the same quiet tenor from now until the time he went to bed. It was this even mental tenor that old Doctor Sharon had had in mind when, with his flinty eyes fastened on the top button of Eric's coat and with a cold, disinterested voice, he had recommended "a little work, a lot of rest, a little play, and no worrying -- understand? -- no worrying." Time and again, just as now, the wise, cold little doctor's advice would come to his mind, all the hints he had given him in his mechanical, textbook fashion --

Take things lightly, my friend; develop a sense of humor. Fifty percent of the neurotics in here are in here because they didn't have a sense of humor -- and many other little bits that Eric at the time had thought he would be sure to forget because of the doctor's uninspirational delivery, but which somehow or other stuck in his mind like little round pebbles in a pool of water. Today, Eric felt, today at least he could observe a strict mental diet, choosing each moment with an eye toward making the peace in his mind carry through from waking to sleeping.

He would spend the day, or as much as possible of it, alone. Cleone and her mother were going on a train trip to Burlington, thirty miles away, to do some shopping for spring clothes, and his mother had finally consented to go with them, although she had planned to start her spring cleaning today. Mrs. Comfort could start it, and they would pitch in full force tomorrow. They would probably not be back until supper.

After breakfast his mother, already dressed and ready to start her little trip, took him aside and spoke quietly to him for a few moments.

"I went down to see the little Mattison girl last night," she said. "Aunt Myra and I went down with Mrs. O'Connor; she suggested it when we got over there." She paused.

"I wouldn't mention this, Eric," she continued, "except that I thought you might want me to. Mrs. Mattison asked for you. She remembered seeing you on the train when you came home; she and her little girl saw you, remember? Little Mary asked about

you three or four times that night; she seemed to take to you. And the mother remembers it, poor thing, among the last thoughts of her child."

Eric was moved. He remembered the little girl and her mother very distinctly, as he did most of the impressions he had formed on his journey home. It surprised him, though, that either of them would remember him.

"I was thinking," his mother said, "that she might be pleased if you went down. You'd have to go tonight, because the funeral is tomorrow. She looks very peaceful and lifelike;; it's no shock to see her. You wouldn't have to look, anyway, if you didn't want to; just to talk a minute with the mother."

She was apologizing for the unpleasantness of the task she had suggested. She was doubtful, too, whether she was doing right by Eric to ask him to go. Eric saw the struggle going on in her mind.

"I wanted to go all along," he said untruthfully. "I wasn't sure they'd remember me. When should I go do you think?"

His mother looked relieved.

"Maybe about four, -- but wait -- if you wait until five, we'll be back and then Cleone could go with you, unless you want to go alone."

"No, that would be fine. I'd rather have Cleone. Will you ask her?" Cleone was upstairs dressing.

His mother nodded. "Have you got something to do today?" she asked. "You won't be lonesome?"

"I've got the day all planned out," he said.

Eric kissed his mother goodbye and went upstairs to his room. He was surprised to find that it was only eight-thirty. His mind had been traveling so lightly since he got up, so free and unburdened, that it had sped back and forth across each minute innumerable times, stretching time out of all proportion and making an hour seem like half a day. But now his mind had slowed to a more temperate pace; not that it had once again been saddled with the heavy burden of yesterday, but it had felt the pull of a check-rein at the bit and had come down to earth. The day, after all, was not to be entirely his.

But how could he wish it otherwise, he thought, feeling a tug of pity in his breast. The poor mother and her little dead child, what little he could do, after all, he should do gladly and willingly. Their lives had only touched in passing, but even if proximity imposes no obligations, there is a higher law -- there must be, he thought, for he could feel it -- which does oblige us at least to take cognizance of the suffering of others. If there was no such obligation then he was unnatural, for he felt it. And not for a minute did he wish that he did not feel it.

Until five o'clock, however, the day was his, and he would go on with his plans. He intended to spend the morning working around in the garden, and in the afternoon to take a long walk. It was spring, and his blood was stirring. While he was putting on some old clothes, a paint-stained pair of pants and a thin slip-on sweater, he heard his mother call good-bye

from downstairs. Then his Aunt Myra. He answered them and listened for Cleone's voice. Her quiet voice talking to her mother sounded to him, but she did not call. Cleone hadn't spoken to him since last night, and he knew that she was nettled because of his sympathy for Albert.

When he got outside, he found the air a little chillier than he had expected, but he decided that a little work would soon warm him up. The long row of trees that jutted at right angles to the south side of the house in front served as an effective barrier to the sun, and kept it from penetrating to the garden, which was on the same side of the house but a little farther back, until about the middle of the morning. Consequently the dew was still wet on the grass and on the dead leaves that were abundantly strewn about the garden, on the flower beds, under the rose bushes, and in every other conceivable place, sheltered or unsheltered, having been blown into the garden from the orchard a hundred yards away in the direction of town and from the thickly clustered grove of trees a little way west of the orchard.

Arming himself with a rake which he found in the barn, Eric proceeded to attack the problem of cleaning up the garden. He worked slowly and methodically, taking his time in order to get pleasure out of the exercise, but at the same time doing an exceptionally thorough and efficient job. Eric was a fastidious worker, whether the job in hand was agreeable or not; that was one of his marked characteristics, an extraordinary capacity for taking pains.

About twenty-six or seven years ago the flower garden had been laid out by Captain Tobin, with the help of Tim Cadwell, the gardener, who was then a little less than middle age. It was one of the first additions that the captain had made to his newly-acquired home, and it had remained unchanged in form ever since, except that the beds had sunk deeper and the grassy aisles between the beds had become more pronounced, firmer and hardier. Each spring the same type of bulbs were planted; each year the same bushes bloomed at approximately the same period; each summer, beginning in late June and lasting through to early August, the garden was at the height of its glory, and there was none more beautiful for miles around. Tim Cadwell still had a hand in keeping it in trim, but Mrs. Tobin did much of the work herself, planting the bulbs and pruning the bushes with tender hands and a reminiscent mind; for the garden, more than anything else in her life, brought her husband back to her. Tim mowed the grass in the garden and usually raked the leaves, but Eric had offered a few days before to undertake the latter job himself.

To Eric, too, the garden brought thoughts of his father. Although he naturally couldn't remember his father, he had often seen pictures of him and listened to descriptions by his mother. But he preferred to think of his father in terms of the garden, as a man so abundantly endowed with the esthetic that he wished always to have beautiful things around him; whose sensibility was delicate enough to conceive of a source of beauty in a blank field; and whose love for beauty

was strong enough that he was willing to work the earth with his hands until it took on the shape of loveliness and delicate, fragile, beautiful things were conceived, and quickened in its womb..

Strangely enough, though, Eric's thoughts of his father were hardly more tangible than this subtle apperception of him as a quality; he had no clear picture of him in his mind, in spite of the fact that he had looked at his face countless times in a photograph. When the picture was not before his eyes, he forgot the lineaments of his face; his mother's description of his stature brought up no tangible image. To Eric, his father had always been and probably always would remain, nothing but a vague feeling, entirely impersonal, disembodied; a quality, beautiful, enviable, irreproachable: like the jumbled reflection of a forest of highly colored fall leaves, when one sees in the water only a mass of soft colors with no clear outline, not an individual tree visible.

One half of his mind absorbed in his reveries and the other half concentrating on his work, Eric failed to notice Tim Cadwell, the gardener, enter the little enclosure on his left and stand there watching the process, one hand in his pocket and the other pushing the shapeless felt hat up off his head so that he could finger experimentally the smooth polished dome underneath the hat. He was a little man, thin, bony, and prematurely old. But he stood as straight as a ramrod, as though willing to catch in his teeth any and all of the bullets from life's firing line. Unfortunately, though, he had no

teeth; his whole face below his nose was sunken in so deeply that it resembled a cup, and try as he might this acquired deformity always prevented him from looking severe, angry, or determined. The eyebrows above his sunken, watery blue eyes were bushy and pure white. His forehead was so low that only a single, deep furrow had had room to form, and above this could be seen a ridge of flesh where his forehead left off and his crown began. The top of his head was as smooth as glass, but running around the rim of his head, just above his ears, was a windrow of grizzled hair, the same color as his eyebrows but of a thicker texture, in the shape of a horseshoe. He shaved on Sundays and Wednesdays, and hence today his face was smooth, but more commonly a stiff grayish stubble softened the deep caverns in his cheeks and around his mouth. His lack of teeth, miraculously enough, gave him no difficulties in his speech..

Finally he made his presence known by speaking, his lips popping explosively at the beginning of the sentence.

"Mighty fine way to spend a morning," he said casually, an inherent sense of the dramatic dictating a casual tone as the most effective surprise to the absorbed worker.

Eric was not startled. He turned with a smile of welcome to the little man, stopping his work to lean on his rake. There was a bond of friendship between these two which Eric's six years of absence had not been able to shake. Their friendship had been of long standing; the gardener had been one of Eric's first companions, and one of his first teachers; and as they

grew older Eric's attitude of respect and regard remained untarnished by any assumption of superiority. He liked the old man sincerely for his loyalty, his honesty, and his steady, plodding nature which never buckled under any load that life chose to put upon it. As for Tim, he was almost fanatical in his devotion to the whole Tobin family and particularly to Eric. He had never believed that Eric's mind had failed him, and had continually looked forward to the time when the young man should return from his temporary indisposition, healthy, clear-minded, and with the same warm-natured attributes as before. He had never breathed to a soul what he knew of Eric's confinement, for he had been told by Mrs. Tobin in trust, and that trust was to him inviolable. And yet outwardly he did not seem to take seriously his long-standing and deep attachment to the Tobin family. When he had work to do, he did it with an uninspired methodicalness; when he had occasion to speak with Mrs. Tobin or with Eric he spoke casually and entirely without fervor, no matter what the subject, and when he spoke of them, on rare occasions, his manner was detached and impersonal. He was one of those rare souls simple enough to accept a lowly station in life as no less than what was due him, and deep enough to form a noble and lasting attachment, an unswerving, selfless loyalty.

"How are you this morning, Tim?" Eric said, knowing the answer by heart.

"No better'n usual, and no worse," said Tim..

"I didn't mean to cheat you out of a job by doing this,"

Eric said.

"Don't mind," said Tim. "Got plenty to do. Got the driveway to smooth out while it's still soft; 'bout as rough as a ploughed field, and ain't half as handsome. Plenty else to do around here, too, to keep a man busy."

Eric knew that was true. He looked at his palms suspiciously for blisters. On the middle of his left finger, beside the knuckle, a smooth shiny spot was beginning to show where the handle of the rake rubbed against it.

"Oughta wear gloves," Tim said. "I got some in the barn.. Wait, I'll get them."

He left and in a few minutes returned with a pair of old, brown cotton gloves, which Eric thankfully put on. Tim stood by for several minutes, watching him work. Every once in a while he rubbed his broad, flabby nose with the back of his hand as though he were ill at ease. Eric guessed that he wanted to tell him something or else just wanted to talk. Tim always had difficulty getting started, but once started he spoke vigorously, easily and fluently.. And it was interesting to listen to his flow of quaint phrases and his homely manner of expressing his ideas.

"How is Mrs. Cadwell?" Eric asked.

"She's housecleanin', Tim said, as though that should settle any doubts as to his wife's health. "Got everythin' turned upside down 'n inside out. No livin' with her no more fer a week or so."

After a time he added, "She wants to know when yer gonna

pay us a visit; been lookin' for you right along."

Eric's conscience smote him. He had intended to make Mrs. Cadwell's cottage one of his first points of call. She was a motherly woman, loud-spoken but very kind, younger in years and in appearance than her husband, extremely capable and extremely diligent. Although her life had been rather tragic, it would be hard to know that from her appearance; she had had two children, both of whom were dead. Lillian, Tim's favorite, had developed ptomaine poisoning -- Tim blamed it on a can of cherries from which she had been eating -- and had died shortly before her eighteenth birthday, just when youth and beauty seemed to be favoring her. Her death had almost broken Tim's heart. The second blow came four years later when their boy, fourteen years old, just four years older than Eric at the time, had fallen from a load of hay and broken his back. For Mrs. Cadwell it must have been a bitter sorrow, for she had pinned her hopes on her boy, but the shock had changed her very little. She was motherly now to everyone, and very mellow toward her husband. Tim's remark that there was no living with her during house-cleaning was hyperbole, and Eric recognized it as such.

"I'm going over tomorrow," Eric said. "Tomorrow afternoon. I don't know what I could have been thinking of, staying away so long."

Tim opened his mouth as though about to speak; then he changed his mind. He pushed his hat to the back of his head and whacked his bare crown thoughtfully with his hand. He

turned, and started to walk away. When he reached the low hedge which bordered the garden, he stopped.

"I got somethin' to talk to you about," he said. "But I got a job to do first. I'll be back."

While he worked, Eric thought for a few minutes of what Tim might want to talk to him about. It was unusual of the little man to make such a point over bringing up a subject. Eric wondered if he was planning to leave. Soon, however, his mind drifted into other channels, and he forgot all about the gardener.

For the first time since he had come home, Eric began to think about the future; today for the first time he felt a warm confidence in the destiny that lay ahead of him. He felt that in the past two weeks he had been assailed by an army of fears and doubts, as though a hostile force of intangible enemies had laid siege to the citadel of his mind, and he had been watching them with mixed feelings, at times almost willing to surrender and at other times trembling with fear that his stronghold would fall. He realized that he was fighting a battle for sanity, and if the battle was lost it was lost, this time, for ever. But today it was as though he had looked out and had seen that the enemy were in retreat, their force expended; the siege was over.

However, he knew the vicissitudes of his mind too well to believe that now there need be no fear, that all danger was past. Perhaps at this very moment, when he had let down his guard, he was in greater danger than ever before. But his

heart was light, and he felt different, he felt that the battle had turned, that he was winning, that a new day was dawning.

As he stood raking the leaves in the garden or knelt down to pull a recalcitrant pile out from under a bush, he sensed a wonderful freedom of action, as though a tight band which had been encircling his head had been lifted off, a band which had made him constantly aware that his mind was a prisoner and that all his actions were in no real sense his actions but deeds without a motive, without a motivating force, belonging to him merely by coincidence and having no personal origin. But now, suddenly, the band was gone; his mind and his body were functioning as a unit. With each movement of his hands, with each contraction and relaxation of a muscle, he felt this liberation; there was perfect co-ordination -- every movement he made was his, and had meaning through, and only through, its origin in his mind.

At times Eric grew excited by the zest of his freedom, and his work speeded up to a feverish pace until he caught himself up with a shamefaced grin and settled back to a more normal speed. At other times he would fall in love with the movement of his hands as he dug under the briary bushes for stray leaves, and he would pluck away at the black dirt under the bushes until stick, pebble, or fragment of a leaf was swept away, leaving the beds as spotless as the soil in a hothouse.

It took Tim nearly two hours to do his "job", and when he returned he was perspiring freely. No sooner had he got there

than he was off again. He'd catch cold, as he said, if he stood around in a sweat and watched Eric work. So he came back a moment later with another rake and set to methodically raking the leaves up into piles, remarking that if they both kept at it they would finish the job by noon. For a long time he said nothing, probably pondering the subject he had in mind and wondering just how to begin. Finally he started to trim the edges off his topic.

"She's got somethin' She wants to speak to you about," he said.

By "She" he meant his wife. Eric had never heard him refer to her by name, always "She" or "Her". Probably if he wrote it he would spell the pronoun with a capital S.

"She said I might mention it to you. Sort of sound you out," he said candidly.

"You're not thinking of leaving us, Tim?" Eric said. He would have been sad to see the old man go, even though he remained a neighbor.

"Oh, my gosh, no.. No, I wouldn't do that. Last thing from my mind. Wouldn't feel right if I wasn't takin' care of this place." His words were fervent, but he spoke in a calm, dispassionate voice that had no hint of the emotion he felt and which his words alone had to express.

"That's good," Eric said with a sigh of relief. "It would be like losing one of the family."

Tim smacked his lips gratefully at this. He applied himself diligently to raking some of the leaves into a pile, and

even after the pile was made he continued stroking back and forth with the rake, his eyes following the head of the rake assiduously with each stroke but apparently not seeing that he was raking in nothing but empty air.

"Got a problem at our house," he said. "Gotta tell you about it cause I guess maybe you might be concerned in it."

Eric watched him, amused but also somewhat alarmed at the old man's unusual seriousness. Perhaps, though, it was nothing. It was usually his way to treat any subject with mock profundity whether it was big or little; maybe this would turn out to be some inconsequential matter that from anybody else but Tim would deserve only a passing word. Still Eric couldn't fail to notice an unusual agony of thought pictured on the old fellow's face.

"She was cookin' dinner one day, about two years since, when a knock comes on the door an' in walks a gal. Pretty gal.. Mighty pretty. Might even say myself she's about the best looker in town. Well, 'taint her prettiness that She's so all-fired struck with, but because she's got a look about her that's might resemblin' to ar Lilly."

Tim suddenly noticed that he was accomplishing nothing with his rake, and with a smack of his lips he turned to another section of leaves.

"Course," he said reflectively, "a woman sees in a woman a sight more'n a man sees, and a sight different."

"Just the same," he continued, "there's somethin' about her that brings Lilly to mind, even to me. Somethin' about

her eyes mostly, but other ways too.. Well, as I was sayin', She took a shine to her, right off, and kinda made up to her more'n I've ever seen Her do before. Got to comin' to the house quite a lot at nights, sittin' around talkin' and sewin'; guess they kinda took to each other pretty good. Then she kinda tapered off to about once a week; but she always came, every week, even though only once a week."

He paused for a while, bending industriously to his work. He had formed another pile and was now starting on his third. An onlooker would have seen two silent men, both completely absorbed in their work.

"Don't know what they found to talk about," Tim continued, "but women always got somethin' to say. Got used to seein' her there myself, so I got to look forerd to her comin'. Got to know her pretty well, though she didn't talk so much to me; She used to tell me what she said after she'd gone. Felt sorry for her, spite of the fact that she was dammed independent and didn't give a hang for what anybody said about her.

"Well, she still comes. Been there quite a lot lately. That's what She wants to talk to you about."

Again he paused. Eric had a premonition of what was coming.

"Name's Eileen Comfort, Natalie Comfort's girl;" he jerked his head toward the house to indicate Mrs. Comfort's whereabouts. "Know her?"

In spite of the forewarning that Eric's brain had given him, still the sound of Eileen's name gave him an unaccountable shock. All the while Tim had been talking Eric had half-

suspected the identity of the girl; his brain had half told him who it was; but not until her name was actually mentioned did his mind close its grasp completely on the fact. His first reaction was a pleasant, unadulterated thrill of recognition, a quickening of the pulse, a warm coursing of the blood through his veins, as though he had been distributing gifts to a group of people and suddenly had found one which bore his own name. Then there was a quick reversal of feeling as he looked at what Tim had been telling him in the light of what he already knew about Eileen; the thought of her imposing upon the two old people who were his friends repelled him.. And then he asked himself how much, after all, did he really know of Eileen, now could he judge her motives, what right had he to think that there was any reason other than an unselfish one for her visits to the Cadwells. And before his answer to Tim's question had formed on his lips he was looking at Eileen in a new and more favorable light, his tolerance mixed with a warm-hearted rush of personal feeling for the girl..

"Yes, I know her, Tim. She's a very attractive girl. I don't think I ever noticed her when I was here... before, but she was the first person from Keton that I saw when I came back."

It had slipped his mind that he had seen the little Mattison girl and her mother before Eileen..

Tim said, "Course there ain't no rhyme or reason fer her comin' to the house all the time, cep fer the fact she's welcome there, which she can't say of every place else. People

do a lot of talkin' about her, and I guess now she deserves it, but I guess a woman's got a right to... do what she likes if she wants to. Course, She wouldn't say so; She just don't take no stock in what people say 'bout Eileen. Wouldn't believe 'em if they swore on the bible. But fer me, I figger there's plenty a good in that girl that makes a bigger heap than the bad."

They were both silent for awhile, each thinking his own thoughts, Eric down on his knees now scraping with both hands at some thickly caked leaves in one of the beds, and Tim raking slowly and steadily at the scattered piles Eric was leaving. The old man himself must have seen something of his own lost daughter in the girl who had come so casually and yet so wilfully into their lives. Perhaps toward any girl he might have felt the same way; only this time the attraction was strengthened by the close proximation of Eileen's age to that of his dead child. And, too, the ease with which Eileen had made her way into the heart of his wife, and the ease with which she had made herself at home in his house, all this may have strengthened the illusion of resemblance of the living to the dead, and had let his heart decide what his sober judgement might have rebelled at. In any case it didn't take long to see that he was warmly biased in favor of the problematical Eileen.

Eric quickly saw through the little man's unemotional, matter-of-fact summation of the girl's character. Tim wanted to believe as his wife believed, that the gossip about Eileen

was nothing but malicious slander, and in reality she was good, she was clean, and worthy of all the love that the love-starved couple could pour out upon her. It must have hurt him, Eric thought, to be so reserved in his statement about her, to half-agree with the condemnation the world had made, to stifle the voice that came from his heart and to give instead the judgment of reason.

Eric himself was bewildered by this new light thrown upon the girl's character. He reproached himself for snatching up too greedily the first hint of goodness that anyone had cast out about her. At their first meeting, perhaps at the first meeting of their eyes, he had felt an almost overwhelming desire to believe only good about her, and her brother's abrupt fierce condemnation had terribly shocked him. Since then his own impression of her had been locked in silent combat with the impression that others had been giving him; he could have saved himself much mental anguish had he known that his subconscious wish, the wish to see nothing but good in her, would surely win out over any contradictory impressions no matter how numerous or how overwhelming they might be. At the moment, however, he was hard beset with doubts and conjectures coupled with a powerful attraction that he could hardly analyze but which he recognized as containing a strong element of pity.

He heard Tim emit a short dry cackle and realized that he was indulging in one of his rare bursts of laughter. The sound shook the worry from Eric's mind and left him once again free and untroubled like a child awaking from a troubled sleep who is

suddenly freed from childish doubts and fears by the sound of his father's voice. In a moment Eric, too, was smiling.

"Better warn you," Tim said, "they got somethin' cooked up between them. They're liable to rope and nogtie you like a Texas steer." He cackled again..

The seriousness which had enveloped their conversation had floated by like a cloud across the moon. But evidently the old man's thoughts had got ahead of his speech; he had left something out. Eric waited for him to catch himself up.

"Oh, forgot to tell you," Tim said. "Eileen's took a shine to you. Wants Her to get you over there so she can meet you, hee, hee."

Eric felt himself blushing and hoped that the old fellow wasn't looking at him. Then Tim's voice was serious again.

"Course, I wouldn't do this if I wasn't pretty sure...." He didn't finish.

But Eric knew what he meant. He'd rather lose his right arm than bring harm to Eric by bringing the two of them together. So after all he must be pretty sure....

"You'll come tomorrow, then?" The old man stopped working and turned to face Eric, looking searchingly into his eyes.

Seeing how much it meant to the little gardner, Eric nodded, and they both turned hurriedly to their work, both silent, both happy.

Still in the same elevated mood Eric made his way early in the afternoon across the fields in back of his house. He

had eaten a heavy lunch, and now he walked slowly and listlessly, feeling physically sluggish but mentally spirited and carefree. From a sky dotted with high white clouds, the sun shone down bright and hot; it was the warmest day, Eric guessed, that the spring had produced, and to feel the heat penetrating through his clothes added a new zest to the season..

He didn't ask himself where he was going; perhaps he didn't know. Shortly after lunch he had started out, with no planned itinerary, in fact not knowing until after he had started just which direction he was going in. Now as he walked there was no "end" in his mind, no preconceived idea of a place where he could say, now my walk is ended, now I must go back. He gave it no thought; he just walked, his head in the air at first watching the moving skies until he grew somewhat dizzy and felt a kink in the back of his neck. Then he began to look at things closer at hand, the level ground of the hayfield, showing traces of green, the three rolling hills ahead, a mile on his right at the other end of a pasture a group of houses that represented a small farm, on his left another long stretch of hayfield and pasture land ending in a thin line of trees which he knew bordered the macadam road that ran in front of his house and a few miles beyond took a sharp bend that brought it almost within his view as he looked from where he was walking.

Now he was coming to the place where he had lain down yesterday, pretending exhaustion, in an effort to catch Cleone while she was on guard. He paused to examine the ground,

mildly expecting to see the imprint of his body still retained by the grass and the soft earth, and then he walked on.

Swallows were swooping and careening in the air singly or in groups of three or more. Other birds which he did not recognize skimmed across the field a foot or two above the ground, and always there seemed to be a crow or a flock of crows rising in lazy timidity fifty yards or so ahead of him and beating their way upward and away as he approached. A stone's throw on his right he spotted a wood chuck as it rolled its furry body towards its hole and stopped at the edge to wait for a hostile move. He took a couple of steps in the direction of the alert animal, and it popped abruptly underground.

As he mounted the rise to the crest of the first hill, he was greeted by a lusty bedlam of caws, and a flock of crows rose in a body out of the little valley before him and made off to a safe distance. One or two hardier ones remained standing there for a while, but at last they too flew away with vociferous complainings, leaving the field deserted of all signs of life.

Eric sat down practically in the same spot he had sat the week before. For a moment he wished that Gleone was with him, but then he rejoiced in being alone. Solitude added something to the experience, made him feel strangely elated, excited; made his blood tingle as though a little of the wildness of savagery were still running in his veins. He forced himself to relax, however, to lie back with his hands under his head, and to let the sun beam down on his face and body, while his

eyes followed the drifting seething firmament and his brain seemed to roll sleepily inside his head. He sighed heavily in peace and perfect happiness, and a light smile played on his lips as he thought now beautifully this peaceful mood had stayed with him all during the morning and still clung to him as closely and as lightly as the white clouds cling to the blue sky over his head.

Eric Tobin, lying on the knoll in the field under the warm spring sun, had fallen asleep. He dozed peacefully for over an hour and woke just as slowly and calmly as he had drifted into slumber. He noticed dreamily as he sat up that the sun had taken a longer slant, and across the field in front of him the shadows of the trees beyond made a fretted pattern on the edge of the field. He knew that toward evening, those shadows would reach half way across.

As he looked, he felt his blood go thick with the old inexplicable call of the woods. He got up slowly, and as though drawn by a beckoning hand walked down the hill into the valley and toward the woods. His legs carried him without compulsion of his will; he felt that he had but to face forward and in time the trees would embrace him. His body tingled with an unreasonable excitement.

In the old days before his confinement and before he had gone to college he used to feel the call of the woods, like an invitation to some hidden but beautiful adventure, and he used to respond in just this way. He used to walk slowly toward the woods, these or the ones on the other side of the road in

front of his house, and as he walked he would feel a rising pitch of excitement which would reach its climax just before he entered the shelter of the trees. Once in the woods, he would feel his excitement level off to a more normal tenor: and then he would stride boldly along in and out among the trees, stepping on or over fallen logs, leaping over bent saplings, sometimes swinging from a low-hanging branch, or again hiding behind a tree to spy on a squirrel or a rabbit. Part of the thrill came from being in the midst of the wild life, and his eyes were always peeled for birds and beasts of any description. Often he had seen foxes fleet through the brush, and then it was a joy to try to outwit them and catch a second sight or a third. Sometimes he would be startled by the bursting flutter of a pheasant's wings as the bird plummeted from its hiding place. Sometimes he would find a well-worn deer trail and follow it for miles into the woods, often catching a glimpse of a startled fawn or buck..

These moments alone in the woods excited him in an incomprehensible way, mentally as well as physically. His mind would flit from thought to thought with remarkable rapidity, and he was able to give to each thought an intensity and a clarity of reasoning that he could recapture elsewhere only at rare moments. And physically he felt elated, strong, vigorous; he could feel at the beginning the sweat of excitement under his arms and running down the sides of his body, but soon under the labor of his walk that would be replaced with a healthy perspiration on his forehead and his back..

But now as he walked through the woods he held himself back, picking his way slowly and carefully over the uneven terrain, with his head down watching the ground at his feet. He felt ashamed to give way to his excitement after having analyzed it the other day as partly sexual. He tried to make his nerves relax and to disregard the excited prickling of his skin. He would have retraced his steps and gone home except that he felt the walk and the woods would have a subsequent tranquillizing effect.

Many years ago during the summer he had spent a week building a little log cabin deep in the heart of the woods. Covered with pine and hemlock boughs and with the cracks and chinks stopped with pitch, it had been a passable shelter from the wind and rain. Occasionally he had even slept there. He thought now of making his way to the cabin to see if it was still standing.

He thought of Cleone, and a momentary shadow darkened his mood. They had quarreled, wordlessly, of course, but she was angry with him. But the shadow passed as he thought that she was sure not to hold him any grudge. It always made him happy to think of Cleone. She had the most even disposition of anybody he knew, was entirely unaffected, and yet was remarkably understanding and intelligent. Had his own feeling of sympathy for Albert not been so strong and had he not been so sure that his friend was deserving of sympathy, he might have sided with Cleone and have adopted her viewpoint towards Albert. Even so, he had momentary doubts concerning his own interpretation of

Albert's character, and he wondered if possibly he was being unaccountably blind to the possible evil in his friend's nature. Cleone, he thought, was too normal, too well balanced, to be able to make allowances for the unbalance in the make-up of another; and furthermore she did not know all the facts in Albert's case. Nor did he, for that matter.

He would have to try to convince Cleone of the injustice she was doing Albert, or perhaps it would be better to let the matter rest. Perhaps he would find out more about him when he saw Eileen tomorrow.

Eileen was a strange girl. He could not understand her. Like her brother, her adjustment to her world was faulty. And like her brother she was suffering, and through no fault of her own. This Eric thoroughly believed. She didn't show her suffering though, but underneath the defiance and the devil-may-care in her eyes, Eric had caught a glimpse of pain, a questioning pain that one sees in the eyes of an injured dog. She was too proud to show it. Eric wondered why she wanted to see him, why she should be interested -- if she was. He wondered what she would have to say to him, how she would treat him, with spite and meanness or with gentleness. She was capable of either. Behind the white mask of her face he had seen mirrored doubt and perplexity; in her deep black eyes he had seen strong feeling, a depth of thought, a fierce rebellion. All these he had seen or thought he had seen in their two brief meetings. And now that they were to meet again, and at her wish, what would come of it.

He tried to picture her as she would look tomorrow. Her face, a little too thin and sharp, rose before his eyes. It reminded him of the face of a little girl he had seen, some time long ago, as he was walking on a city street. It was pinched with hunger, with a haunting look of hopefulness as though someone had promised to meet her there, her mother perhaps, and was long overdue; but still there was a faith beaming in her face that the promised meeting was soon to occur, very soon now. That same look he remembered seeing in Eileen's face, an unguarded revelation that was soon replaced by a mask of indifference. But it was that look which he remembered above everything else. And her eyes were the eyes of the world and at the same time of a little child. Never before had he seen so much in a woman's eyes. There was a canny light in them that flickered, it seemed over the surface, which could easily be mistaken for the picture of her whole character, and which told a tale, as quickly as a sly wink, or precise understanding of all the evil that men live by and of a furtive joy in such knowledge. But behind that gutter-bred sophistication lay something deeper, something proud, something warm, a sign of great sadness and understanding, a promise of great passion. Behind that lay a soul, a soul that --

Eric caught himself up and stood still. He suddenly realized that his pace had increased to an almost unbearable tempo; he had been striding like mad over rough and smooth ground alike, brushing branches and bushes out of the way with a broad sweep of his arm, plunging through the woods as though

his life depended on his progress. His feet were wet where he had waded needlessly through a brook, and his face was wreathed with cobwebs, unnoticed until this moment. And yet in spite of his exertion his breath came easily, his heart was beating rapidly but not painfully; physically he felt as though he had been strolling along in a leisurely fashion; the sweat had not even broken out on his brow. But his brain was at a white heat.

He paused irresolute, trying to stop the whirling sensation in his mind, wondering whether he should turn back toward home or go on to his cabin, which lay concealed among the trees a few hundred yards ahead. Knowing that when he got there all he would see would be a ruined framework surmounted by a few dead limbs, he decided not to go on. He turned and retraced his steps toward home, wondering at his own strange actions and feeling strangely ashamed.

X

Eric and Cleone went out together after supper to visit the Mattisons. It was a rather dark night, with an unhealthy warmth in the air that boded rain. Going down the driveway with its border of shrubs and overhanging trees, they could barely see their way, and Cleone took hold of Eric's arm for fear of stumbling..

She had treated him rather coolly during supper, and he was perturbed. She hadn't seemed angry in her silence, but rather as though she were seriously weighing the good and the bad of his character, and it seemed to him that she disapproved of his friendship for Albert and was trying to judge whether that was enough to earn him a full measure of her condemnation.

And Eric suddenly realized that he valued Cleone's good opinion more than a little. He wanted to see her gray eyes, clear and lovely, turned on him with fondness and complete approval. He wanted her to smile at him with sympathy and understanding, as though they were of one mind on any subject, and anything that he might say would find an echo in her heart. But it seemed as though she had drawn aloof from him. Her calm face, reflecting an enviable lightness of heart and evenness of disposition, seemed to be worlds removed from him, like the austere face of a judge who is trying some guilty beggar of the streets. For a time he wondered, as he had

wondered before, whether Cleone was really capable of strong feeling or whether the calmness of her face was a reflection of great shallowness. But remembering her outburst against Albert the night before, he decided that her serenity was due to the perfect balance of her feelings, that like water her emotions always sought an equilibrium and found it. That evenness -- that balance -- gave him a confidence in Cleone that he couldn't remember ever having had in a woman before -- and made him feel his present alienation all the more.

Eric felt somewhat comforted when she took his arm. He was glad that they had decided to walk instead of taking the car; this was better -- since it was almost two miles to the Mattisons' house, on the other side of town, this would give him a chance to heal the breach. But when they reached the main road and turned toward town she released his arm, and they walked on silently, side by side but, as it seemed to Eric, miles apart. Once as a car bore down on them from behind, she tugged at his sleeve to make him stop and let the car go by. Then they went on as before.

When they came abreast of the entrance to the cemetery, Cleone suddenly stopped.

"Eric," she said in a startled whisper, "there's a light in the cemetery!"

He felt her fingers dig into the flesh of his arm, and for a moment he was startled. His flesh crept as he saw the light, and then through a troubled haze of recollection came relief. Years ago he had been familiar with the phenomenon,

but for the moment he had forgotten it. The light in the steeple of the Congregational church, almost a mile away on its little hill in town, each night cast a reflection on the smooth marble surfaces of some of the tombstones, and that reflection at certain angles appeared to be an actual light in the cemetery. Sometimes two or three "lights" could be seen at one time.

"What is it?" Cleone asked.

"Let's go over and find out," he suggested banteringly..

She hesitated. "All right," she said, a shade of defiance in her voice.

They entered the narrow gravel driveway through a tall, thick evergreen hedge that shut the front of the cemetery off from the main road. On either side of them, guarding the low mounds, a variety of tombstones large and small pushed their way out of the soft earth. Some were low and inoffensive, leaning toward or away from the grave or to either side, chipped and dull by time and weather; others loomed up threateningly, their bright surfaces still gleaming like the fresh face of youth. Occasionally a conical spire shot up from a costly monument and pierced the night a full yard above its fellows.

Hand in hand the two walked along the soft driveway, until suddenly Cleone stopped.

She exclaimed, "It's gone!"

Eric chuckled..

"Come over this way," he said, and pulled her over a few feet to one side of the driveway. They were almost stepping on

a grave.

"Why it's there again!"

"Now move your head a little to the left."

She did so.

"It keeps disappearing and coming back -- Oh -- "

She stamped her foot in vexation. "It's only a reflection."

Eric laughed softly.

"You knew it all the time. I ought to -- " and then she too began to laugh, a little nervously.

"I'd seen it for years, but I'll have to admit it fooled me just now at first. I'd forgotten all about it. Were you frightened?"

"Scared stiff," she said. "If I were half as angry now as I am relieved we'd have a fight right here."

"I wouldn't have tried to fool you if I hadn't been so desperate. I thought maybe if I could get you in here where it's so quiet and we're so close to -- eternity -- maybe you would forgive me."

Her voice was soft. "Forgive you? Do you really want my forgiveness, Eric?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose I should hold it against you just because your taste in people differs from mine, but I can't help disliking that Albert, and I just hated the way you took his part last night, and seemed to be making friends with him when really he can't do anything for you but harm."

She paused, and Eric said nothing.

"He seems to me to be terribly self-centered, and to talk about his mother the way he does is unnatural. Why do you like him? Or do you?"

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully..

"Well, anyway, I forgive you. I don't enjoy being on bad terms with you."

He took her hand in both of his with quiet joy.

"Thank you," he said simply. "I've been unhappy all day on that account."

Hand in hand they left the cemetery and continued on their way, talking lightheartedly. When they reached the Congregational church, after passing through town, Eric's thoughts reverted to the cemetery. He pointed to the belfry.

"Up there," he said. "See the light? That's the prowler in the graveyard."

They climbed the little hill and turned to the right down the east arm of the cross. Another half mile would bring them to the Mattison home, the last house on the street. There was no sidewalk, and so they had to walk on the macadam road.

Eric said, "I used to spend a lot of time in the cemetery at night. That was before I went away -- to school. I'd go in there at night and sit between the furrows made by the mounds or lie down with my head on one of the mounds -- and there I'd lie and think, the most strangely solemn and yet the most enjoyable thoughts you can imagine."

"You were morbid," Cleone accused.

"Yes, but I didn't realize it. I was happy in being

morbid. It wasn't any more quiet in there than many other places I could have found, but there was an atmosphere about it that appealed to me; there was a sort of peace that's deeper than just quietness, the kind of peace that takes your breath away. Do you know what I mean?"

"No," she said sharply. "It was the beginning of -- " She broke off.

" Yes, that's true," Eric said after awhile. "That was the beginning. But I was very happy then, almost ecstatically happy, especially there or -- " He was going to say "or in the woods" but he checked himself without knowing why..

They were walking arm in arm, close to each other, keeping step, their hands clasped.

"You shouldn't talk about it," Cleone said. "All that's past; you shouldn't dig it up."

He continued. "It was a perfect refuge. I knew that nobody else would ever come in there at night. It was quiet and peaceful -- 'the peace that passeth all understanding' --. We all have our secret refuges, and the haven that my physical body sought and found, there in the cemetery, was indicative of the refuge my mind was seeking at the same time -- and which it finally found."

"Please, Eric." She shook his arm, but he took no notice..

"Once I read, though, something that troubled me. Until then I had no qualms about my love for the graveyard; it seemed perfectly natural for me to go there at night, to lie there and philosophize and dream, and it seemed natural that I

should miss it whenever I couldn't go. But once I read something that disturbed me and made me doubt my own mind. I read that some men were known to have an abnormal desire for corpses, a real love for them, so that they would go into a graveyard, driven by their perversion, dig up a woman's corpse, and -- and embrace it."

"Horrible," Cleone said, shuddering.

"I was afraid for myself when I found that out, although I knew that I had no desire that way; the thought of it disgusted me. But the cemetery did have an attraction for me."

"It does for most people."

"But I thought it might be the beginning of that sort of perversion in me, necrophilia it's called. I kept going there just the same, but it wasn't the same. I was troubled, and I kept examining myself while I was there to see if -- and that made it all the worse, my mind I mean -- "

"No more, Eric, please."

"Just this -- I think that my mind burrowed even deeper into its refuge after that emotional unrest had snatched my physical being out from its favorite haven. My mind continued to live in its own graveyard refuge even when I had torn myself away from home and forced myself into college."

"Didn't you like college?"

"No, I hated it. I worked very hard, studying until my mind was in a complete turmoil. But that wasn't the worst. Whenever I wasn't studying, I was thinking about people, pitying them, loving them -- because I was constantly thrown

in with them up there; while at home I was able to get away from them -- but that is what finally broke me down, I think, the constant fretting over other people's troubles. There was something in me as sensitive as down to a breeze, that drew me to other men and wrenched my soul at the pain they were bearing."

"But people aren't all in pain; unhappiness isn't universal."

"There's so much of it, though, that I was never at peace, until finally -- well, my mind just completely submerged itself in its refuge."

"You know better now."

The firm warm clasp of her hand and the soft friendliness of her voice drove the cold from his heart. He strode along feeling relieved for having talked, and yet the void that might have followed such an out-pouring of confidences did not develop, was filled by his regard for her, by her gentle confidence in him.

He was a little bit ashamed for having talked so much, for perhaps having shocked her; but he didn't trust himself to speak again, and soon this feeling was dispelled by the closeness of her body and the harmony of their movements as they walked along together.

When they passed Mr. Ayres' house, he thought momentarily of Albert's shocking allusion to the grocery man the night before, but he shrugged the unpleasant thought away and continued walking in silence. Already he knew Albert's love for the sensational.

"This is it," he said, stopping before a little white house set back about fifty yards from the road.. A neat flag-stone walk curved from the road to the house. A dim light showed through the lowered shade of one of the front windows. The house was on their left.

A few yards ahead the macadam surface of the road ended and the dirt began. A row of thorny bushes starting at the roadside ran vertically back to within a few feet of the front line of the house, forming a boundary line for the large front yard. There seemed to be a sort of driveway meeting the road on the far side of the row of bushes, but it was just a turning place where visitors to the Mattison house turned their cars around in order to park on the side of the road near the front of the house.

"Should we ring the bell when we get there?" Eric whispered. Cleone was leading the way up the walk.

"No," she said. "Better knock."

They reached the door, and Cleone knocked softly. Eric took off his hat.

Mr. Mattison, who opened the door for them, was a tall, angular man in his early thirties. In stature he very much resembled Eric, somewhat thinner and a couple of inches taller. He wore bifocal glasses which gave his light gray eyes a huge staring appearance.

Eric explained who they were, and Mr. Mattison invited them in.

As they entered, a woman's voice called softly from an

upstairs room.

"Who is it, John."

John Mattison answered in a subdued voice, "The Tobin boy."

Mrs. Mattison came downstairs hurriedly and greeted them..

Eric was embarrassed by the earnest gratitude in her voice as she thanked him for coming.

"I'm so glad you came," she said, "because I wanted you to see her -- Mary. She was struck by you when she saw you at the station -- remember? The last words I heard her speak were about you.. She was getting ready to go out and play in the yard, and I was going up to town to do my shopping -- oh, if I'd only taken her with me -- and she said to me, 'He's a nice man, isn't he Mummy?'"

Eric was afraid she was going to sob, but she controlled herself.

"This is Cleone Halliday," he said.

"Yes. I met your mother last night."

They shook hands, and Mrs. Mattison led them into the living room. The living room looked out on the front yard and the road. Eric caught a glimpse of the casket in one corner of the next room, the dining room. The air of the room in which they sat was heavy with the odor of flowers.

John Mattison said, "The police were here again this afternoon; I thought that's who you were when you knocked." He was evidently ill at ease and at a loss for something to say.

"Oh, but they haven't bothered us much," Mrs. Mattison said. "They have been very considerate."

She spoke in a natural tone of voice. Only her face, pale and drawn, and the redness around her eyes revealed the strain she was under and her grief.

"They think Johnny Kinney did it, I guess," her husband said. "They said only a lunatic could do such a thing."

Involuntarily Eric thought of what Albert had said the night before. They would decide that Johnny had done it. He wondered what made Albert so sure that Johnny hadn't done it. And what made him suspect Mr. Ayres?

"No one in his right mind could do a thing like that," Mrs. Mattison burst out. "She was such a good little girl; she never hurt anyone in her life. There was no reason, no earthly reason...." Her voice drifted off.

Eric saw Cleone cast a quick look in his direction, and he felt the blood drain from his face. Did they know about him?

"They wanted to know what her habits were," Mr. Mattison explained. "Whether she was in the habit of running off, and if she took to strangers -- and a lot of other things."

"How painful it must have been for you. I should think they would have waited until later," Cleone said.

"They wanted to get away; they're going to leave it to the town authorities to pick Johnny up. They'll probably put him in an asylum; that's the place for him. The women in town have always been afraid of him, except Martha here, and he should have been put away long ago. Then this thing wouldn't have happened." Despair and anguish were in his voice and a sort of resentment.

Again Eric caught Cleone's quick look..

Mrs. Mattison said, "I don't understand... I know I never will understand... how she could have wandered away. She never did that before. She had no reason, such a happy child.... and contented."

"Perhaps it was just a sudden impulse," Eric put in quickly, with a sudden intuition of what she might say next..

"Martha thinks she might have been going to see you. She liked you so much at first sight. Martha pointed your house out to her -- you can see the top of it from here, you know -- and naturally she would take a short-cut through the woods, not knowing the way by the road."

"You shouldn't say that, John. You make Mr. Tobin feel bad. As though he were the cause... You shouldn't think that," she said, turning to Eric warmly. It might not be true, but even so..."

"No, I don't think so," Eric said, trying to ease her embarrassment. But the thought troubled him.

Several times he found himself wishing that he hadn't come. He felt that he had placed himself in a false position, that he had no real reason for being here making this visit, after all, he barely knew either the mother or the child and had met the father only tonight. He felt awkward, as though he were intruding on their privacy. Yet he was sure that the mother was grateful to him for coming.

She talked of their meeting on the train. For some reason or other she placed special importance on that meeting. Perhaps

it stood out in her memory as a turning point in her life, and then the fact that the child had mentioned him just before her mother had last seen her must have given him a special importance in the mother's eyes. They had been visiting, she said, for nearly a week in Philadelphia, at the home of Mrs. Mattison's mother. The old lady had been feeling feeble for some time and had continually coaxed them to visit her, feeling perhaps that her own end was near and wanting to see her only grandchild before the end. It had been the first time Mary had seen her grandmother, and they had taken to each other immediately.

Mrs. Mattison had decided not to tell her mother about the child's death.

"She won't live much longer, and it would just cause her needless suffering to tell her now. She doesn't expect to see us again."

"It would be a comfort for you to have your mother with you now," Cleone said.

"She's too sickly to make the trip. I wish she could be here, especially after -- after the funeral -- but I'm afraid she couldn't stand it. She's pretty old."

Mr. Mattison said, "I've tried to tell Martha that she ought to let her mother know and then go down to stay in Philadelphia for a little while. That would help her to get used to not having Mary around, but she doesn't want to do that."

"I'd have to face it sooner or later," she said. Her hands were clenched tightly on the arms of her chair, and she

sat rigidly upright; but her face was composed. "Going away wouldn't help. When I came back there'd still be the empty house and the reminders. No, I'll face it now. That's the best way. And maybe if I...." She left the sentence unfinished, and her husband gave her a quick glance, his face becoming gloomier.

The little woman's braveness and spirit touched Eric to the quick. The quick surge of sympathy caught him off guard and he stirred in his seat with acute discomfort. There was something indescribably pathetic to him in her quiet acceptance of the tragedy and in her forthright determination to see it through. Her grief must have been deeper and keener than her husband's, and yet she was controlling it better than he. From her eyes and bearing there seemed to vibrate a hope and confidence for the future, while in the husband's demeanor Eric could see nothing but sullen despair and a resentment that amounted to a general condemnation of an order that could let such a thing happen to him.

On the heels of his sympathy Eric felt a sharp discontent in his own inadequacy. What could he do? What could anybody do or say in such a situation? What words or deeds will fill the great void left by death? His helplessness overwhelmed him.

Outside on the sidewalk came the sound of someone's footsteps, and the front door opened.

"Hello," Mr. Mattison called, starting to rise.

A girl's voice, soft and musical, answered, "It's only me."

And Eileen Comfort appeared in the doorway.

If she was surprised at seeing the visitors, she made no sign. She looked around quickly and pleasantly and then went directly to Mrs. Mattison and kissed her. She stood over the older woman, patting her on the back as though she were a child.

"How are you tonight, Martha?" she said, talking softly and rapidly. "I wanted to come down earlier, but Mr. Burton kept me until late. He would, you know, just when I want to get away."

She sat down on the arm of Mrs. Mattison's chair, with her hand on the other woman's shoulder.

Mrs. Mattison introduced Cleone. "You probably know Eric Tobin," she said. "Yes, I know you do. You told me so the other day."

"Yes, we've met." She meant Eric, but she was looking at Cleone.

The two men had risen when she came in, and Eric remained standing, feeling that it was time to go. He had been surprised to see who the visitor was and still more surprised on finding Eileen on such apparently familiar terms with the Mattisons. Martha Mattison's face had brightened perceptibly when she saw Eileen and she was looking at the younger girl now with warmth and gratitude.

"Don't go," Eileen said. "Sit down, won't you? I'm glad to see you both. I want to get acquainted with you -- better acquainted," she added, turning her eyes on Eric.

Eric sat down on the edge of his chair. He sat looking down at his hands, unable to meet her eyes. For a few moments

there was an uncomfortable silence..

Finally Cleone said, "I knew as soon as I saw you that you were Albert Comfort's sister. There's a strong resemblance."

"You've met Albert then?"

They spoke as though there were no one else in the room but them, in low, level, guarded voices. Eric forced himself to look up. Eileen was still gracefully resting on the arm of Mrs. Mattison's chair, her left foot on the floor, the other caught behind her right leg. She was leaning back, her arm supported by the back of the chair, one hand in her lap and the other gently caressing Mrs. Mattison's shoulder. She had evidently thrown her coat off in the hall, and her black silk dress set off her beautiful figure to its best advantage. She was carelessly aware of her beauty.

"I met him last night," Cleone said, "for a few minutes."

Eileen looked inquiringly from Cleone to Eric.

"He came to see me," Eric said.

Eileen said, "Oh. Well, he's not at his best these days. He's been moody and grumpy lately, and hard to get along with.. But when he's himself he's very likable. You'd like him then."

She smiled at Cleone. "Eric likes him even now."

Although she was smiling and looking her most attractive, there was a glint in her eyes that might have warned them..

"But Eric likes such queer people," she continued. "He's very fond of my mother, for instance." She was speaking more rapidly now and a faint flush had come to her face. "Not that I blame him for that. My mother is a very fine person in her

way, very fine -- but she is peculiar -- in respect to her children mostly, or to children in general. It's not her fault, of course; her children haven't turned out very well." Here she smiled again, and seemed almost on the point of laughing. "But we won't go in to that. The point is that Eric's fond of her, and of my brother too. I'm sure if I were queer enough he'd be fond of me. If he does get to like me, I'll be sure that there's something wrong with me. He goes to such extremes. He even built a cabin once for Jonny Kinney to live in."

There was a stifled scream from Mrs. Mattison. Eileen stroked her shoulder soothingly. She looked quickly from one face to another, evidently realizing that she had gone too far.

"That's not true," Cleone said, her voice low, and with a hard quality in it that Eric had never heard from her before. "And this is no place to say such things. You are saying that to hurt him, out of spite."

Eileen didn't answer. She bent her head and whispered in Mrs. Mattison's ear.

"Where did you find that out?" Eric asked.

"Nowhere," Eileen said hurriedly, apologetically. "I didn't find it out. Really I didn't. It was just a guess, a stab in the dark. I was trying to hurt you, being mean; I'm sorry."

Cleone was watching her curiously, a puzzled frown on her face. The Mattisons seemed to take her peculiarities for granted. Neither showed any surprise at Eileen's temperamental outbursts.

"It's true, you know," Eric said. "I did build one -- and then gave it to Jonnmy Kinney before I left. And of course you must have known of it; you couldn't have guessed. Someone must have told you."

Eileen glared at him, her face pale.

Mr. Mattison was sitting forward in his chair tensely.

"Is that where he is now?"

"Of course not," Eileen said quickly, looking furiously at Eric.

Mr. Mattison paid no attention to her. His staring eyes were fixed on Eric.

"Is he there now? Could we find him if we went?"

Eric shook his head.

"Are you sure? He might be there. Did he ever use it?"

"Yes, he used it, I think. But he's not there now."

"How do you know?"

"I visited the cabin this afternoon. There were no signs of anyone. It was empty."

Eileen breathed a sigh of relief. Mr. Mattison sat back in his chair and his face relapsed into its former look of bitterness. Mrs. Mattison, tense and expectant before, relaxed and brushed her hand across her eyes and forehead.

Cleone got up. "Shall we go, Eric?" she said.

Mr. Mattison got up, dutifully mumbling some words which he had evidently got by rote....."take leave.... before you go... in the next room..."

Cleone and Eric followed him into the next room, where a

dim light was burning from a single floor lamp. They stood over the casket looking down at the child's body for a few minutes, silently. Eric had a peculiar sensation on recognizing the dead face which he had seen only once living. It was the first time he had ever seen a dead child, and he never forgot the experience. All the childness seemed to have gone out of the face at which he gazed, and there remained only the cold features of an individual, immobile, like a colorless wooden image. The liveliness, the inquisitiveness, the warmth of childhood were all gone, and a wax figure remained. On looking at other dead people he had imagined that he could detect a beauty, a beauty that was hardly expressible, hardly understandable; but in some strange way death had always struck him as being beautiful, stamping on the features of its victim something of its own mystery, its own peace and eternity. But nothing of that could be seen in the face of the child. Instead, something had been taken away, the something that makes a child attractive to almost everyone; and with that gone, all was gone, and nothing remained but an expressionless, meaningless pallid shape with the features of humanity.

Cleone and Eric left as quickly as they could, with a whispered goodbye to the stricken mother and father. Eileen was sitting still on the arm of Mrs. Mattison's chair, still stroking the grieving woman's shoulder. She did not look up as they left.

XI

That evening's promise of rain was fulfilled on the following day, and Eric when he awoke on the morning heard the pattering on his window with an unaccountable feeling of relief. Then it dawned on him that today was the day he had promised to pay a visit to the Cadwells, where he fully expected to see, not only Mrs. Cadwell but Eileen Comfort. And he was for a time at a loss to interpret the involuntary sigh of relief that had escaped from his lips when he had heard the rain.

But that thought was crowded from his mind when he remembered that the funeral of the little Mattison girl was to take place at ten that morning. Too bad, he reflected, thinking of the mother and father and other people standing in the rain as the last rites were performed and the casket sank into the earth. The picture came so vividly to his mind as he lay in bed that he stopped his thoughts to examine them, and a memory from way back in the past, dim and confused, came to him of having been a witness of just such a scene, perhaps a member of the funeral party.

He was undoubtedly thinking of his father's funeral. He recalled last-minute preparations, being bundled up hastily in a heavy navy-blue coat and a cap which he couldn't remember but which seemed somewhat like a beret. Then rubbers were clapped on his feet and mittens on his hands -- evidently they

had almost forgotten him -- and he was hurried outside into a horse-drawn closed carriage. He could remember his mother's white sad face, but whether she was in the carriage with him or in another he couldn't say. The trip to the cemetery was not at all clear in his mind nor whom he rode with; of course the journey had been very short. But the scene at the grave side was vivid in his mind. He had remained in the carriage, watching through the rain-splattered window. Men in uniform had carried the casket from the hearse to the grave. They stood there afterward at attention, and his mother stood sadly alone. He remembered crying as he saw his mother, not realizing what was happening, only knowing that his mother was deathly pale, standing in the rain, and that something must be dreadfully wrong to make her stand there while she got all wet. Then came the sound of a bugle song, terribly sad, being played almost in back of his carriage, and at the end of the song the terrific crash of guns that startled him out of his wits and made him cry out with fear. All the rest was a blank, as though he had lost consciousness at that moment and hadn't come to for years afterward.

Gloomily Eric got out of bed, washed, dressed, and went down stairs.

After breakfast he went into the little library off the living room and tried to read. The rest of the family were busy, his mother and Aunty Myra helping Mrs. Comfort with the housecleaning, and Cleone working quietly in the sewing room. In spite of the privacy, however, Eric found it impossible to

concentrate on his book. It was as though he had left some important task undone, and the consciousness of negligence were continually rising up to haunt him.

But it wasn't that, he thought; there was nothing that he had left undone. Restlessly he walked to the window and looked out. The rain was coming down steadily, not a downpour nor even a heavy rain, but a fine misty spray that drenched the trees and bushes outside and covered the top of the hedge with a frosty coat like a garment of cobwebs. Part of his restlessness he knew was an empathic response to the thought of the funeral party which would soon be standing in the wet chill of the morning watching the lowering of the body into the grave. How wretched they would feel, with nothing on earth to relieve the ghastliness of the occasion. Would the poor mother finally lose the admirable control she showed last night? Would Eileen be standing beside her to comfort her and strengthen her? And this day would seem like the last measure of bitterness to the father, who seemed to have taken his child's death so hard, and whose grief instead of being mellow and consuming was like a hard core of iron cooling in his heart. It couldn't have been alone his love for the child that had caused the father's reaction, not that alone, but something in his own character, a weakness perhaps, a feeling of inferiority, of helplessness -- something that, when faced with a hard bitter fact of life, suddenly threw up a defence that was bigger than the fact demanded. We all react to death with bitterness, but that is soon replaced by sorrow, in recognition that sorrow

is concession; we give in to death. But the father was not giving in; he kept his bitterness and cast out his sorrow.

Eric remembered the look which he had cast at his wife last night, as though he were on the point of forgetting himself and entering into her world. Brave little woman, full of a healthy deep sadness, bravely and wisely controlled. Perhaps her sorrow would act as a catalyst in his heart, and before the iron of bitterness had set too long would touch off the reaction that would bring him back to normalcy. Perhaps by now the catalyst had acted and the storm was brewing in his heart. The cleansing storm.

Eric turned sadly back to his book.

But he found it even more difficult to read. He had the sense that he would enjoy the book if he could only jump through the pages from climax to climax, omitting the tedium of reading sentence by sentence and page by page. But he refused to skip. He plodded through the paragraphs, holding his mind down to the page by the same effort of will that he held his eyes down.

Then suddenly a ray of light fell across the pages of the book, and he jerked up his head with a feeling that was almost like despair. But no, the sun wasn't shining; the curtain had been parted by a draft and had merely let an extra ray of light filter into the room. He breathed a sigh of relief.

And suddenly he knew the cause of his restlessness. He was glad it was raining! That was it. The rain gave him an excuse for not visiting the Cadwells that afternoon as he had promised, and he would not have to face Eileen. As long as it

kept on raining he was safe. All this time he had been subconsciously afraid that it would stop raining -- and that accounted, too, for his involuntary feeling of relief when he awoke this morning and found it raining -- and his conscience, too, was bothering him, for in reality he had put off something that he had promised to do, had put it off on account of the rain; and his conscience was already accusing him of negligence, even though the time of his appointment had not yet arrived.

The rain, however, was a pretty flimsy excuse. After all, he merely had to step out into the garage, take the car, and then after a short drive take a few steps from the car to the Cadwell's front door. He tossed the book on the table and got up, pacing the floor nervously.

He could understand why, at this moment, he was so reluctant to see Eileen. Yesterday, he admitted it ashamedly to himself, he had thrilled at the prospect. But something had happened in the meantime which had changed his attitude. Was it what she said last night, he reflected, her trying to make me look ridiculous by saying I had built a cabin for Johnny Kinney? But her words hadn't made him feel ridiculous; they had merely puzzled him as he tried to understand their real import, what she was actually trying to do to him and why she had chosen this means and this particular time to be nasty. Or did he feel that she was getting a hold on him, whether he liked it or not? That was probably it. He could feel her influence almost as strongly as he could feel her brother's; somehow or other, although it seemed silly to him, he couldn't help

feeling that each was trying to win him over. And, strangely enough, it was not their power of winning him that he feared so much as his own willingness to be won. He felt drawn to them both and knew that neither was good for him. No wonder he was restless; he wanted to see her, and yet he dreaded the actual meeting.

The rain was no excuse. He must go.

Cleone stood in the doorway.

"What in the world is the matter with you?" she asked good-naturedly. "I've been listening to you stirring around in here as though you were an animal in a cage."

He was happy to see her.

"What kind of animal?" he said, suddenly lighthearted.

"A noisy one." She looked out the window. "We can't go for a walk, but why don't we play some kind of game. I used to be good at checkers; I could play my father to a draw any time, and sometimes beat him. Do you know how to play? Would you like to? Well, then, the next thing to do is find a board."

They went into the living room, and Cleone set up a card table and placed a couple of straight-backed chairs opposite each other at the table, while Eric hunted up a board and a set of checkers.

The first two games were draws, and then Eric won one. They talked intermittently between games.

"I have to go out this afternoon," he said. "To visit Mrs. Cadwell, Tim's wife, our gardener, you know -- have you met him yet? He's a fine old fellow, and his wife is a fine

woman. They lost both their children, a boy and a girl, and they haven't any now. Mrs. Cadwell's a gruff woman, but kind-hearted and good; she's always been good to me. I should have visited her as soon as I got back."

He wondered if Cleone would like to go with him; he would feel better if she were there. He asked her.

"No," she said. "I promised mother to help her make over the dress she bought yesterday. It's got to be taken in in spots and let out in others."

"Couldn't you do it just as well tomorrow?"

"I suppose so. But she's in a hurry for it; she wants to have it done before -- and anyway I don't know the Cadwells, Mrs. Cadwell at least, and I doubt if it would be very pleasant -- you understand, don't you?"

He realized that he had been selfish in asking.

A little later she asked, "When are you going to see Albert again?"

He remembered that he was to see Albert on Saturday, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what day it was today.. It seemed as though Saturday must have come and gone or else that time was dragging by at a snail's pace.

"What day is it?" he asked.

She looked at him queerly, and he flushed.

"Perfectly natural to forget the day, isn't it?"

She said, very quickly, "Yes, of course. I was just trying to remember it myself."

He knew she was lying.

"Friday," she said. "Friday, I think. It's so easy to forget; after all, there's no reason for remembering the day of the date around here. I just happened to remember that the funeral is on Friday."

They were silent for a time, absorbed in the game.

"You play checkers as well as a man," he said as she forced the game to another draw.

She smiled at the compliment. "I usually beat the men I play with. You're the best player I've ever met, outside of my father."

"I used to play almost every day at the asylum -- after I'd been there a while. There was a fellow there I used to play quite often. He was a perfect idiot in every respect except that he could play checkers beautifully. I never beat him."

"How strange," Cleone said. "It's your move."

Once she stopped in the middle of a game. "Look," she said, "the sun is coming out."

It was true, and his heart leaped. But he couldn't tell whether he was pleased or sorry.

While a few hundred yards from the house, in the soaking wet cemetery, a little group of people wet to the skin groped sadly away from an open grave. With bent heads Martha Mattison and her husband led the way. Suddenly the woman lifted her face, stained with tears, pale and worn with fatigue, and she exclaimed in a whisper that seemed to ring with hope, "Look,

John, the sun is coming out."

The man lifted his head and looked, but he could see nothing through the steam on his glasses. But somehow the bitterness was gone from his face; the tight lips had loosened; and the tears were streaming down his cheeks. He squeezed his wife's arm convulsively and said nothing.

At a little distance behind them, Eileen Comfort followed. She kept looking at the ground as though she had lost something and was slowly retracing her steps to look for it. She did not notice the sun.

While, on the other side of town in the kitchen of his home, a young man with a sullen, harsh face and burning black eyes, sat over his fourth cup of coffee. Although the room was warmed by the kitchen stove and he was wrapped in a heavy bathrobe, he shivered once or twice and pulled the bathrobe close around his neck and chest. Suddenly he looked up, and an unpleasant crafty smile played around his full lips. "Ah," he said aloud to himself. "The sun is coming out. Now for a trip into the woods." And with these words he leaped hurriedly to his feet, as though he had just remembered a pressing engagement, and unmindful of the spilled coffee he plunged headlong out of the kitchen and bounded upstairs to his room.

While in a house on the east arm of the cross, a fat man with firm, smooth red cheeks, bald head, and bewildered, dazed blue eyes, turned in his bed and with the same motion swung

his feet out over the side and sat up. One short rasping cough shook him, and for a moment his head rocked dizzily..

"By God," he wheezed, "the sun is coming out."

The stolid woman sitting by the window, crocheting, watched him closely but said nothing. Even though she sat in a rocking chair, the swelling curves of her figure were visible and beautiful. Her face was cold and expressionless, but her lips were full and moist, and her eyes were warm.

Lew Ayres stood up and slipped out of his pajamas. Facing the woman naked he stretched himself and rubbed the firm flesh of his stomach. He was fat but solid, and his white skin glistened like marble. Seeing his wife's look, he hastily began to dress.

"I'm going to work," he said. "When do we eat?"

While, in the same house where Eric and Cleone were playing checkers, Natalie Comfort, mother of Albert, mother of Eileen, sitting alone at her table in the kitchen for the first time in many months let the years of the past unroll before her inward vision.

The phlegmy, consumptive cough of her father whispered at her across the years, and his long thin face with its sallow skin, its sunken cheeks, and its fever-filled gray eyes, peered at her reproachfully and questioningly. He had never understood her; he had never really known her. What a strange, abnormal life they had lived, just the two of them, there on the little makeshift farm two miles north of Keton, for the

ten years after her mother died, for the ten years it took for the farm and her father both to dwindle to nothing and finally to pass away. He had died of grief, she knew that, and she -- she had lived on her grief. From fifteen to twenty-five she had lived in a sort of dream world of which her image of her mother was the center, the guiding star, the inspiration, the source of all her delirious happiness and her ecstatic sorrow. At first, of course, she had looked toward her father with great faith in his power to resist the blow of his wife's death and with faith in the strength that he would be able to impart to her; but he had wilted, he had shown the white feather, and her faith had been replaced by scorn. In the end she despised him for his weakness. The girlish fire in her black eyes died to a dreamy light as though the zestful blaze in her soul had burnt to embers, and the animation which had played spiritedly on her countenance at the slightest provocation now sank into passive immobility. She grew dreamy, morose, perverse, unresponsive. At twenty-five she was beautiful with a peaceful, Madonna-like beauty that belied the smouldering passionateness and defiance and pride that seethed deep under the dreamy exterior that she presented to the world. Her father gradually wasted away before her eyes, and at the very end she wasn't aware that she had been watching him die for all these years; for in later years when she called back an image of her father to her mind, she saw him as he was at the end, a thin, fever-ridden husk of a man, silent, distant, and old. Nor could she picture him as he had been earlier in

his life when her mother had been alive. At that period in her life, someone might have tapped the hidden well of her nature and brought up into the light all the passionate and beautiful force of her nature that ran deep and ran strong below the surface; someone might have recalled her to life out of her dreams and brought up to the light of day the turbid stream of thought and emotion that coursed like a subterranean river through her mind and being.

Natalie Comfort, sitting alone at her table in the kitchen, for the first time in many months let the years of the past unroll before her inward vision.

Oh mother, there you lie, sweet mother, companion mother; all our happy days together gone. Girl-mother, so much like me and so much my own. Gone. Happy days. So still there. Or isn't there a sign, just one sign; a little trembling of the dress, or was it just the wind, a draught from underneath the door. When I watch closely it seems -- her dress there -- seems to rise just a trifle, ever so little. A breath maybe -- ever so little -- a reawakening. All a mistake. Could they be wrong. I ought to tell him; maybe he could see it too. Maybe he sees it. No, his head is down. He's given up; he doesn't even hope. I won't give up; it can't be true. Oh, it mustn't be true. No, it isn't. It isn't. --- I won't give up.

I won't.

All last night he sat there like that hardly moving once, his head down, and every once in a while rocking forward as

though he were dosing off to sleep, but he wasn't asleep, he was rocking himself like the niggers rock when they're crying, like the old Jew woman down in Leton when her boy was kicked by a horse. Ah--ah, rocking away. A way to show their grief. He doesn't want to show it though. Maybe people just are that way; it helps to make the sorrow less. But I don't feel like rocking. I feel all tight inside, and hopeful too. I won't give up. All last night like that, and he hardly sees anyone when they come in. What is he thinking of, so silent all the time, or doesn't he think; maybe he's just feeling. -- I can't let myself feel that way --. He must be thinking, though. Is he thinking of what was happening on that night I heard the bed creaking and went out in the hall to listen at the door. -- I mustn't think of things like that; it isn't reverent -- I wish I had heard more. It seemed so... evil... at first, and then it seemed all right. It's not wrong, after all, when you're married. I shouldn't think of that. Mother was so good, though, she wouldn't do an evil thing. She explained it all so nicely to me. I want to ask her some day -- oh, mother! I have so many things to ask you. I won't give up.

How can I ask her now? There, he's rocking again. Maybe I could ask him. Not the way I feel now, I'd feel embarrassed; but you change in your feelings after a while; that's the way I felt toward mother, too, at first, embarrassed, but then there was a change. Now I could talk to her about anything. I won't give up. But if I spoke now, spoke to her, one little word, wouldn't she have to give some sign, wouldn't that wake her?

Nobody's spoken to her since -- then. Always about her. Always 'she was such..', she was such...'. And if I said mother are you listening, wouldn't she stir, wouldn't she have to stir, "Mother, are you listening?"

He shouldn't have told me that; I was too young. He should never have told me. It was something I should never have known. He was standing there one night in spring, almost a year later, standing there by the steps of the side porch, facing the mountains, the Adirondacks, facing toward Lake Champlain. He must have been standing there an hour, since supper, looking, looking. Just as he always looked, peering into the distance, not over the tops of the trees, not around them, but right through them as though they weren't there. Whenever I got home from school I'd find him sitting in the chair in the living room, looking right through the wall down toward Keton, and I used to think that he was able to see me while I was there, that he'd watched me all day while I was in school, that he'd seen me come out of school and get into the bus, and had watched me all the way home. And sometimes I'd turn and wave to him; I felt good that he was able to see me; I think I must have loved my father then almost as much as I had loved my mother. And I was proud of him that he was so strong, that he never cried or complained. It seemed to me that he was fearfully strong; he seemed able to bear my grief as well as his own. Oh, it was so comfortable to think that; I couldn't have lived without thinking it, or wouldn't have wanted to live.

I think I really loved my father then. Yes, I think I really loved him. Strange what thoughts will go through the mind of a girl at that age. I really wanted to be his wife, to take her place, to give myself to him just as she did. Did I ever think that? I must have thought it. That's what I really wanted. One night I dreamt that he came into my room. His face was shining with a bright warm light, and his eyes were full of love, and I knew that what I had been hoping for was going to happen. And in my dream I pretended to be asleep so that he wouldn't be ashamed, but I could see him even though my eyes were shut. He came up close to me and I could feel the heat of his body; even though I wasn't touching him I could feel that his body was soft and smooth and warm, almost hot. He pulled the covers back, and somehow I didn't have anything on; my skin seemed to be bursting with little bubbles like soda water, and my breasts pained me so much that I was almost crying. He started to reach his hands out to touch my breasts and I could feel myself raising them up to meet them, and then there was such a delirium of pain that I almost fainted and I felt my body melting away from his reaching fingers, melting away in the distance, getting farther and farther away. But his fingers kept reaching and his arm got longer and longer; the farther my body moved away the longer his arm got, until at last I forced my body to stop and his fingers touched me on the breast. He touched me on the breast, but I could feel it -- there. It was so delicious, a spasm, the first time. My whole body seemed to melt away and nothing was left but a great glow

of feeling. And I woke up, so ashamed, and so happy. I don't think I've ever been as happy. The next morning I felt so tender toward him. I wanted to kiss him and press my body against him, but he was silent as always, pale, and looking, always looking, away in the distance. He stood there that night looking out toward the Adirondacks and toward the lake as though he could see it through the trees. It was spring and warm and no snow left anywhere except on the tops of the mountains in the west. He shouldn't have told me. Through the window I saw him, and I took my apron off. I felt so strange that night. Sixteen, I was, and I felt so lonely, not just missing mother but something deeper, a desolate loneliness. And I wanted to talk with him, to have a good old-fashioned talk, that's what I needed, to lie on my back with my hands under my head and just talk and talk until there wasn't anything more to say. He didn't like it at first when I sat down on the steps. It did me good just to sit there near him, he was so strong and deep; I felt all comfortable inside again as soon as I sat down. He must have stood there almost an hour without saying a word while I sat on the porch steps beside him. I can remember it all so vividly. Down in the hollow the lights of Keton blinking, the dark trees against the light sky, the stars, a cloud or two; miles of woods on my right, and the loom of the mountains so far away and yet near enough to be a part of my life and thought; the first warmth of spring left over from a sunny day, so mild that I could lie back on the porch and stretch my arms without shivering from the wind creeping up

my dress: the smell of wet leaves and damp ground mixed: the sweet fresh smell of new grass and running sap; and over all the blended chorus of peepers with here and there an individual questioning chirp. My last sweet taste of heaven, ah, my last. I should have died then.

He said, "Your mother would have liked a night like this."

And then silent again for a long time, leaning against the pillar of the porch, looking at one of the lights of Keton as though he could see through the window out of which it came and was watching with his calm strong gaze his distant neighbors. How good I felt, to have him there beside me, the strength and greatness of him, strong as the hills all around me. I wanted to sing. How strange a girl is at that age. I felt that I loved everyone in the whole wide world.

Then the bottom seemed to fall out of my life; I felt as though I had been flung bodily over a cliff and was falling into a bottomless valley with nothing to hold to, nothing to reach for, down and down never to reach the end. I heard my father sob and I saw his shoulders shake, and suddenly it was all so clear, so different from what I had thought. He had been crying all the while inside of him, never letting it out, and the grief had been eating him away until there was nothing left but a weak hulk of will-less flesh, and that now was shaking itself to pieces with sobs. How did I feel. It was as though I had been standing on the ice in the middle of a deep lake, and suddenly I had heard it crack all around me and felt it stir beneath me; or as I have felt since in dreams when

I seemed to have the power to fly and I launched myself into the air higher and higher until I was above the clouds and nothing but space beneath me, and then suddenly my power to fly left me and I hovered for a fraction of a second between flying and falling while the enormity of my height passed like a deadly blight into my mind. That's how I felt. All the while that he stood there crying, how pitiful he looked, I knew that I should pity him and all the while instead I could feel that hate growing in me, the strangest thing, that I should hate my father when a little while before I had loved him so much. With his shoulders shaking and the cracked, whispering, sighing sobs coming out of him, the echoes of a thousand years of grief. And I sitting there watching him, hating him, almost crying with rage, until I couldn't stand it any longer and went inside and up to my bed. I must have been asleep, lying there on my stomach with my clothes on, not thinking of anything, just lying. Because I didn't hear him come in, but I felt his first touch on my shoulder. I didn't move, but he must have known I was awake; he knelt down beside the bed in the dark. How could he put it all into words, all that, and all that which I shouldn't have known then or ever, but he did; he wasn't talking to me, he was talking to his soul and maybe to my mother; and the words came babbling out like pelting rain, and I felt all the time as though he were kneeling beside me, deathly sick, and puking up a never-ending spume of sickly thoughts and words, until he was free of it all and I was left wallowing in the filthy vomit. It's all so clear to me, the

whole scene, the every feeling that I had, the pitiful slobbering weakness of him and the deathlike stench of the whole room as though a year-old corpse were kneeling by my bed, and my misery, my hate, then and forever after; and yet I can't remember a word of what he said, not the slightest word has ever remained in my head, nothing but the sense of what he said as though he hadn't spoken at all but just poured his thoughts out in a stream. And yet all that -- what he told me -- wasn't so bad; it wasn't right that I should feel that way toward him, that I should hate him and despise every word he uttered, because it wasn't so bad. That wasn't the reason I hated him, I knew it then and I've known it ever since; I hated him because he let me down, because he wasn't worthy of my love, and I had loved him so deeply and so proudly, and now I could never be proud of him after seeing how weak he was. And yet I always declared to myself that the reason I hated him was that he killed my mother. Why, why? Why did I really hate him? Even now for all the things that have happened to me in my life I want to point back to that fact and say that's the reason, that's the reason I hated him, that's the reason I detest my own children, that's the reason I'm like I am. But I know it isn't true; in my heart I know it isn't true; in my heart I still -- love him?

If I ever were to understand the real truth of all this I'd go mad. I came so near once, all because I began to think, oh, so foolishly that after all, during all those years, I had hated my mother instead of my father. And that couldn't be

true; it would mean my whole life was based on a lie; I lived in her, I lived in dreams of her. After she was dead she was more real to me than anything in life. And yet once I said, and then my reason began to go, that down deep in my heart I hated my mother. God bless her, there's nothing I ever loved more truly, everlasting love, and it was my father that ruined it, his selfish love and his weakness when I was ready to honor him for his strength. His passion it was that killed her, he must have known that, and that was what he couldn't forget. Is it possible to love someone so dearly that you would like to see her die just to put your love to the test? He must have said that, he must have thought it. He knew another child, after me, would kill her, after me, after me -- as though -- and for so long they didn't -- at all, not at all; and then they began again, just a little; they couldn't stand it, of course, not to do it at all, and they were careful, he was so very careful. One day in spring it happened, just as though there was no danger, all the way, and he knew immediately that he had killed her, he must have known it even while it was happening, so that the greatest joy that a man can have mixed with the greatest sorrow; embracing her there with all his ugly passion, knowing all the time, knowing now is the moment, embracing there, the greatest joy embracing the greatest sorrow, and his passion pouring out into her a dose of poison. And she -- how she -- taking it, giving her whole soul to it and giving her life, on a spring day. Then it began to grow; she must have known with each day's growth it was bringing her nearer



and nearer. They were happy then; the worst had happened, and yet after all it might not -- be so bad; how could the doctor know? And they were happy, like lovers, no fear, the worst had happened. For six months, and I never noticed it, and yet I remember her then, so tender, so much the mother that I'll never forget, and then it killed her. Oh mother, there you lie, sweet mother, companion mother; all our happy days together gone. And I didn't know -- so still there -- growing like a cancer in you the fruit of his passion taking away at last your life; curled up in your sweet mother-womb like a snake waiting to strike. The bed creaking -- that was after nothing could hate -- hurt -- you then, time and again taking his full relief after years of waiting, planting his filthy discharge in you now that it was safe since you had already given your life and death was growing inside of you ready to strike out when its time should come and that strike meaning blood and pain and death. And then when its work was done nothing left of it but an ugly mess of blood and slimy flesh after six months of growing inside there with one of its hands on your heart. After me, after me -- could he have said that -- which meant that I, that I had paved the way, that I was guilty too, almost as though I'd planned right at my very birth that after me no more love, that now he was for me, as though I'd planned her death, that I was as guilty as he -- why? Impossible. Because I loved him? But even at birth? Stop, STOP, stop. I can't think of that. When last I thought of that my mind, ah my mind, ah my mind reeled, REELED. Stop.



And then years later, sitting on the porch; all that past; three, five, seven years, all passed so quickly, like a dream, a continual forgetting and yet never forgotten. Years later sitting on the porch, in beauty dressed, in beauty, in beauty bathing, all the world so beautiful, and I so beautiful dreaming, God, such lovely dreams, of passion, of passion all I knew. If ever dreams like that come back to me, ah, sweet... that then was death, when those dreams left and I began to live instead of dream; then I... ah... I then died, descended into hell without burial and have rested on the right hand of pain and misery forever, world of pain without end, Amen. But sitting on the porch there, my father inside staring at the fireplace or the blank wall, coughing now and then and looking hopefully for blood on his handkerchief, and I... ah... I. Beautiful, in beauty bathed, not knowing that all my years of dreams were life itself, father, mother, God, and life to me, and love. Thinking, maybe, this was heaven though only a dream-heaven and back there lay hell and hate; not knowing that ahead

At the same moment, 7 P.M., June 15, 1917, in Park's General Store in Keton, Peter Comfort, a blond, serious, thick-witted young giant, was playing a desperate game of pool with a dapper young fellow named Lew Ayres. It was the third game. In the first, Lew had spotted him one point and had won; in the second, two points and lost; and now at the start of the rubber game, with a two-point spot, Peter was determined to win

the ten-cents-and-cost stakes that they had bet on the outcome.

They were playing in what was known as Park's Back Room, which was really the rear section of the store, closed off from the front section by long gray drapes of the texture of heavy mosquito netting. Anyone standing in the front part of the store could dimly see through the drapes the smoke-filled rear room with its long bar on one side, its pool table in the middle, a long wooden bench on the other side, a big parlor stove at the back beside which was a huge arm-chair usually occupied by Papa Parks. When viewed from the front there was an air of mystery about that back room with its strange noises, the hum of voices, occasional heavy laughter, the click of pool balls, and the clink of bottles and glasses and with its dimly-seen figures, sitting, standing, moving restlessly about. If there was a customer in the front part of the store, no one entered through the curtains into the rear; nor did anyone come out unless the front store was clear. There was an unwritten law about that, which was never mentioned but which was very seldom violated. The back room was a little world in itself, Keton's underworld perhaps, although its reputation was far more unsavoury than its character merited. Mothers of adolescent boys, grimly trying to stir their lazy sons into action, would sometimes make the pronouncement, "You'll end up in Park's back room, that's what you'll do; mark my words."

The back room was not really mysterious, though, to the initiated. It was a hangout, nothing more, for young men and older men, where you could get a drink, play a game of pool

or cards or checkers, talk, or just sit and listen and watch. It was a hell of a lot of fun in a quiet, if not always decent, way.

There were only a few men watching as Lew Ayres racked the balls for the deciding game. It was early; there would be more later. Papa Parks sat in his place by the stove, his great bulk completely filling and overflowing the chair. He had composed himself for the evening, and unless something untoward happened or unless the fire got too hot he wouldn't move from his chair until closing time at eleven. His rock-like face would remain immobile no matter what happened, as he surveyed his little domain with his one good eye. No one knew Papa Parks. He was inscrutable as the sphinx; he was fond of talking, but never did he let anything out about himself. And no one ever asked him for information. Children feared him because he was ugly to look at; grown-ups feared him because he was unknowable. His face was massive and hard as granite. One eye shot up into his forehead and showed only the white; the other was bloodshot from strain. One word from Papa Parks was enough to quiet the wildest uproar in the back room, but that word was seldom necessary.

Three other men were in the room besides Lew, Peter, and Papa Parks. Harry Brown, a man of about sixty, one of Papa Parks' cronies, sat on the other side of the stove and waited for his companion to mellow into a conversational mood. Gideon Allen, Papa Parks' helper, who had appeared to be thirty for the last ten years, an oldish young man, stood behind the

bar and chatted with Tiger O'Toole, who was beginning to make a name for himself in Vermont boxing circles, and who drove an express truck for the Rutland Railroad.

"'Youghta put on the gloves with Pete some day," Gideon was saying. "They say he kin handle his dukes better'n he handles that there cue stick."

With one elbow on the bar and a glass of beer in the other hand, Tiger was watching Peter as he chalked his stick before the break. He spoke in a low voice over his shoulder to Gideon.

"Did onc't," he said, "in high school. Had a hell of a fight. Was knockin' the livin shit out of him till he got me in a bear hug an almost broke my back."

"Course he couldn't stand up to you in a plain fist fight, Markus a Queensbury rules," Gideon said admiringly.

"Not by a damn sight." Tiger took a gulp of beer.

"Strong as a bull though, they say."

"Yeah," said Tiger. "Strength ain't everytning though, not in the fightin' game. Yuh gotta have science."

"Well, you got that."

"Yeah."

Peter poised his cueball at the opposite end of the table from the neat triangle of balls just racked up. His blond eyebrows were painfully drawn together as he concentrated on the job before him.

Lew Ayres winked at the men at the bar. He picked a piece of chalk up off the side of the table and applied it to the

end of his cue stick. As Peter poised for the break, Lew turned his back and walked idly over to the window on the other side of the room, still rubbing the chalk on his stick. As the cue ball smacked against the pile, Lew rubbed the steam off a pane of glass and looked out. Everybody in the room was watching the pool table except Lew. Suddenly he walked briskly back to the table, his cue stick poised, the little square of chalk perched on the business end of the stick.

"How did you make out?" said Lew, with a sly wink toward the bar.

"No luck."

"Hmm, that's funny," Lew said, cocking his ear for a laugh from his audience. None came. He flipped the piece of chalk up in the air with his cue stick and caught it in his left hand while he was studying the position of the balls on the table. He set the chalk down on the side of the table, walked over to the other side, pointed with his cue stick to the side pocket, and made his shot. The ball flew into the designated pocket.

"Here he goes," said Gideon.

"Say, Pete, I hear you been drafted," Tiger O'Toole said. His voice had a forced amiability, that did not conceal a guarded hostility and at the same time a note of triumph. Tiger's order number was near the end.

Peter, watching every move at the pool table with fierce concentration, nodded his head without looking around.

Lew Ayres again pointed with his stock, poised for a

moment, and flicked his wrist. Another ball dropped, and the cue ball spun into an easy position behind another.

"Here he goes," Gideon repeated, rubbing the bar vigorously with a dirty rag.

"When you goin'?" Tiger asked.

"Thirtieth," Peter said.

"Two weeks," Gideon said. He had a reputation for being a shark at figures and never let slip the opportunity to show his talent.

"Whereabouts they sendin' you?"

"Fort...." Peter didn't finish. There was a flash of white, a sharp click, and ball Number 14 sped for the corner pocket. Peter gasped. Incredibly, Lew had missed, and Number 14, after spinning around the edge of the pocket, poised on its lip.

"Where'd he say?" Tiger asked Gideon.

"Don't know. I think he's goin' to Devens, though."

"There's a set-up for you," Lew said, chalking up two points on the string above the table. He looked slightly annoyed.

Peter surveyed the table grimly, sizing up the position he wanted after he should have pocketed the "set-up". He took a long time.

Lew chalked his stick impatiently. "Want a pencil and paper?"

"Fort Devens," Peter said without lifting his eyes.

Tiger emptied his glass of beer and snoved it toward Gideon.

"When you leavin'?" Lew asked.

"Just told us that," Tiger said. "Where you been?"

"Two weeks," said Gideon.

Peter shot and made it. He studied the table.

In the back part of the room, Harry Brown gave a sidelong glance at Papa Parks, and ventured a word.

"Ain't much doin' tonight." If Papa Parks just nodded his head, the time was not yet ripe for conversation. If he spoke..

"My friend," Papa Parks spoke in a soft, clear voice, with the precise enunciation and cultured tone of a college professor -- "Quiet nights are bad for business, it's very true, but I value the opportunity they give for relaxation. The hustle and bustle of Papa Park's back room on a busy night is not conducive to meditative ease and leisurely conversation such as we can enjoy tonight unimpeded by those little annoyances that are bound to crop up when business is good."

Harry Brown's face lighted with pleasure at the hint of companionship in his friend's words. He was used to Papa Parks' high-flown phrases, and he loved to hear them roll from his friend's lips. He would have sworn that there was no poetry like Papa Parks' conversation.

While Papa Parks talked, nothing that went on in the room escaped his watchful eye. Nothing ever did. He knew that Tiger O'Toole had had five glasses of beer and was reaching for his sixth. He knew that Lew Ayres had won the first game and lost the second. He knew that Gideon had just taken a bite out of a plug of tobacco and would soon spit into the

chamber pot, which served as a spittoon, at his feet. He could look ahead too, and tell what the evening held in store for each of the young men, and it pleased him to do so. Gideon, of course, would stay behind the bar until eleven o'clock except for occasional forays to the front store to wait on a front-store customer; if business was slack, he would sneak down an occasional shot of whiskey, standing with his back to Papa Parks or kneeling down behind the bar as though to tie his shoelace. At ten-thirty he would sweep up, at eleven he would go home to his bachelor apartment, a little bit tipsy, perhaps, but with his long face still sad and prematurely old. Lew Ayres would win the game and then would wait around restlessly for someone to play him, but no one would. After lingering for some time, getting more and more restless, entering litavilly into whatever arguments were going the rounds, he would slip out. After that Lew Ayres' movements were conjectural: he might go to his room in the block, Burton Block, and study his correspondence course; or he might wander about town playing Peeping Tom at various unlighted windows. This last was only a suspicion of Papa Parks', but he had pretty good grounds for believing that Lew sometimes wiled away his time spying on the intimacy of other people's homes. Tiger O'Toole would guzzle beer for a little while until he got tired of standing at the bar. Then if the evening looked interesting, he might sit down at a table and continue to drink; if not, he would swagger home, tell his mother, a widow, that he had been at the town library, and probably pop into bed. As for Peter Comfort, well,

this was Monday night. And Monday night was a special occasion for Peter, and had been for over a year. On any other night, in fact, he would not be seen in Parks', but would be at home, tinkering away in his workshop in the cellar. Peter boarded with Gamaliel Gregg and his wife, and was given free run of the house. During the day he worked for Gregg, a plumber, and was himself in the way of being, as many people said, a really good plumber, almost better than Gregg. But every Monday night, now, for a long time he had hiked out to the Gordon's, two miles away, and had sat in the kitchen, or on the back porch if the weather was good, with the Gordon girl, Natalie. No one knew why she tolerated him, for she favored no one else, but perhaps his persistence and dogged devotion had won her over. More than one lad in Keton would have given his right arm to be in Peter's shoes on Monday nights, although they sneered at him, as openly as they dared, for wasting his time in a blind alley. So that's what Peter would do after he finished the game of pool. Papa Parks rather liked Peter.

Papa Parks said, "It's the young lads you see on a night like this, with the warmth of spring stirring in their blood and the new moon calling. They can't stay at home. But the older folks stretch their legs on the front porch until the chill drives them in, and they go to bed early. Spring is only a soft spot in their heart; it's the whole leaping soul of a young fellow."

"The young bucks are out fer hell raisin' on a night like this," said Harry Brown, remembering in the wistful tone of his

voice his own long gone youth. "You can see the mischief stirrin' in them right now." He too was watching the men near the pool table.

Lew Ayres had had a run of bad luck; he had scratched twice, thereby losing two points, and he seemed to be missing shots that he didn't consider possible to miss. Peter had run up his score to six points and needed only a few more to win, providing he didn't scratch during the remainder of the game. Tiger O'Toole had finished his sixth glass of beer. Gideon Allen had spat thrice into the chamber pot at his feet, was considering getting rid of his tobacco and having a drink. Lew was poised for a shot.

He made it, and his brow unfurrowed. The streak was broken.

"Here he goes," said Gideon.

"Tell you what," Tiger said, shoving his empty glass into Gideon's hand, "bet you two to one on Lew."

Gideon snorted, "Two to one what --" and broke off abruptly on seeing that Peter had turned.

"I'll take you up on that," Peter said, his face red with embarrassment. "Two dollars against my one?"

"Watcha wanna throw away your money for?" Tiger said, looking furtively toward Lew and then at the score string above the table.

Lew gave him a confident wink.

Tiger said, "Wouldn't wanto raise the ante a bit, wouldya -- say four to two or six to three -- just to make it worth

while."

Peter extracted three crisp dollar bills from his wallet. "Here's my three. Let Gideon hold the stakes."

Tiger fished in the breast pocket of his heavy black and red wool shirt and brought out a folded five-dollar bill. From his pants pocket he pulled two ones. Both handed their money to Gideon.

"Take the beer outa this one," Tiger said, giving him the other dollar.

"Say, that makes it real serious, don't it," said Lew. He turned his attention more studiously now to the table.

"What you gonna do if you win, Pete?" Gideon asked.

Tiger said, "He's gonna faint dead away."

Abstractedly Lew said, "Why don't you get married on it and have a good time before you give your all for democracy." He was lining up a ball.

Tiger blew the foam from his lips and set his glass on the bar.

"Nobody's gotta get married to have a good time," he said, speaking directly to Peter.

Lew flicked his wrist, and a ball shot into the side pocket. He walked leisurely to the other side of the table, cocking his head sidewise to look at the setup on the table.

Lew said, "You do up there in the north country."

"What north country's that?" Tiger asked.

"Two miles north of Keton and turn to your left."

"Ha - ha! That's good," Tiger roared, slapping his thigh..

Peter shifted uneasily, leaning on his cue, and trying to concentrate on the game. His face and ears were pink.

Lew shot again. Number 4 ball banked beautifully off the opposite cushion and rolled dead center into the corner pocket.

Tiger said, "Ain't nobody been gettin' married up there lately."

Lew smiled and in his most polite manner observed, "The fact is nobody's been getting much of anything up there lately."

Tiger almost choked on his beer, set the glass down and let loose a roar.

Gideon darted a quick glance at Papa Parks and another at Peter Comfort.

At that moment Harry Brown was saying to Papa Parks, "You know, they're fixin' to badger that there Comfort boy into a fight or get him so riled up that he's bound to lose the game."

"' Course," he added after a pause, "Pete don't rile very easy."

"How much would you say that pool table weighs, my friend?" Papa Parks asked.

Harry Brown pushed his hat back on his head, and a wisp of thin gray hair slipped down over his forehead. He tugged thoughtfully on the lock of hair, as though he were waiting for the muse.

"Well, now, I kinda know fer a fact that it takes a pretty hefty man to lift one end of it. A mighty hefty man. The whole thing must weigh danged near as much as a Ford car. Fact is, I wouldn't be surprised if it did."

"It's a heavy piece of furniture," Papa Parks said, "as you say, it takes a rather strong man even to lift one end of it."

Harry Brown nodded emphatically. "'Course," he said reflectively, "I seen Tiger O'Toole do it once. Seen him turn his back to the table and lift up one end of it. Cost him a mite a gruntin'."

"Yes," said Papa Parks, "I saw him do that. But I'm thinking right now of another day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and four men came in here. They were Gamaliel Gregg, the plumber, Peter Comfort, and two other fellows. They had been arguing -- that is, all except Peter, who was playing a passive part in the controversy. Mr. Gregg had said that Peter was the strongest man in town, and as a suitable test of strength they were going to have him lift the pool table. They explained it to me, and when I said all right, Peter went over and lifted up one end of it as though it were a dish of soup. 'But that's no test,' they argued; 'Tiger O'Toole can do that too.' 'Tell you what,' said Peter in his quiet way, 'you get six men to lift that a foot or two off the floor and I'll carry it to the other end of the room and back!'"

Papa Parks paused. He pulled the upper lid down over his good eye and stroked it soothingly with his index finger. His bad eye stared balefully straight up toward the ceiling.

"That," said Harry Brown with a click of his tongue, "would be a feat a strenth - a real feat."

"There were a couple of men here at the time, and the six

of us lifted it up off the floor far enough for Peter to get under it by stooping almost to his knees. We held it there for a few seconds while he adjusted himself underneath. And, then, my friend, we felt that table being lifted right out of our hands."

Harry Brown whistled softly.

"He carried it right down to the stove here, turned around and came back. He let it down into our hands as gently as though it were a lady's spring bonnet, and stepped out from under it as cool as you please."

"That," said Harry Brown, "was a real feat."

There were four balls left on the table, and Peter was shooting.

"This ain't no walkaway," Gideon said thoughtfully. "If he makes three of them, he's gonna win."

Tiger fingered the buckle of his belt, forgetting to drink his beer. "Gimme a cigarette," he said to Gideon, crushing an empty package in his hand.

Gideon handed him one and lit it for him.

"Better make em now," Tiger said. "You ain't gonna get another chanct."

The points were exactly even. If Peter sank three of the balls, he would win. He took his shot, calling the corner pocket. He made it.

Tiger swore audibly, and then shouted. The cue ball had "frozen" against the side of the table, and the position looked pretty nearly impossible. Peter paused and examined the setup.

"Give it up," Tiger jeered. "No more chanc't than a snowball in hell. Gimme my dough."

Peter looked up quickly at Gideon, but Gideon had made no move toward the money resting on the lip of the cash register behind the bar. Peter lined the balls up with his eye, leaned over the table, and shot. The ball rolled gently toward the side pocket, seemed to poise on the edge, and dropped in.

Gideon whistled in amazement.

"Luck of the Irish," said Lew. He looked crestfallen.

Peter shot again, and the third ball dropped, the cue ball coming to rest six inches behind the last ball on the table on a direct line with the corner pocket.

"For Christ's sake," Tiger said.

Peter sank the last ball and hung up his cue. He grinned sheepishly across the room at Papa Parks and pocketed the money that Gideon handed him.

"How about another one," said Lew.

Peter shook his head. "Gotta go."

"Come on," Tiger growled. "You got time. Same stakes." He fished vaguely around in his breast pocket.

"Nope," said Peter, his boyish face alight with naive joy. "Seven-thirty. I got a date."

"Come on, Pete," Lew coaxed. "She'll wait."

Peter walked across the room to a sink near the window on the other side and washed his hands.

"Of all the low-life sports," Tiger said in a loud tone to the other two men. "Kin you magine that. He wins yer money and

walks off."

"He's not taking any chances," Gideon said.

Lew hovered around the pool table, pushing the cueball around with his stick. Tiger swallowed the rest of his beer.

"Phew," he grimaced, "it's warm as piss."

Peter came back, drying his hands on a big blue workman's handkerchief. An involuntary smile of pride and glee still hovered on his lips.

"Whatsamatter," Tiger said, "You fraid a losin' if you play again?"

Peter nodded, not trusting himself to speak, afraid that if he did he would laugh like a child.

"Hell," said Tiger.

Lew Ayres said, "He's takin' good care of that money, now that he's got it."

Tiger said, "What the hell you gonna use it fer. -- Give it to yer girl? She don't charge that much, does she?"

There was a deathly silence in the room. Peter's face had gone suddenly pale. He took a quick step toward Tiger and slapped him in the face with the flat of his hand.

Tiger spat blood. "Why you dirty bastard, you. I'll kill you for that." He squared away.

Peter stood with his hands at his side, looking at Tiger curiously, as though wondering where the spot of blood on his chin had come from.

Tiger jabbed him in the face twice with his left and then crossed with a right haymaker to the jaw that would have killed

an ox.

Peter blinked.

Gideon looked helplessly at Papa Parks, who sat still relaxed in his chair, his face impassive.

"Gonna be a fight," said Harry Brown.

"I'm not surprised," said Papa Parks.

"Tiger'll maul him."

"I doubt it," said Papa Parks. "Aha! Look at that."

Peter had flicked out his left arm with the speed of a snake's tongue, and had caught Tiger on the cheek with the back of his open hand. Tiger staggered four feet sidewise and sprawled against the pool table.

"You bastard," Tiger said, sucking a shuddering breath in through his teeth.

Peter stood still, his hands at his side, as Tiger came at him. There was a smack of flesh on flesh as Tiger's left caught Peter in the mouth, and then Peter closed in. He caught the prizefighter by the biceps and held him helpless in front of him. With both hands, one on each of Tiger's upper arms, Peter held him, raging, at arms' length. The boxer struggled and swore. Gideon looked on, his eyes popping. Lew Ayres, on the opposite side of the pool table, nervously twirled a pool ball on the green cushion.

Tiger glared into the other man's eyes.

"Let me go you skunk or I'LL..." He threatened with an uplifted foot and drew it back for a kick.

Peter's right hand slipped from the other's shoulder and

clapped with a hollow sound against the point of Tiger's chin. His fist had moved barely six inches but it landed with the force of a thunderbolt. Tiger's head rolled as though his spine had turned to jelly, and his eyes sank back into his head. Peter laid him on his back on the floor, and straightened up, a questioning look on his face.

"All right, Peter," Papa Parks said, suddenly at Peter's side, "you go about your business. I'll take care of him. -- A bucket of water, Gideon."

Peter turned obediently and went out through the front of the store.

-----Sitting there then in beauty bathed, a silken skein of moonlight on my brow. Oh the dress I wore; a low-cut neck of muslin tight at the waist, tight across my breast. Only an ordinary thing. But in my dream, ah, a dress of silk, sheer as the moon, mysteriously beautiful as the breathless beauty of the night sky, daring as the swoop of a nighthawk through the void to the end of its dip. Caught I was, caught in a dream of passion unsurpassed, so that my heart beat -- and ah, the warm night air like a heavenly caress, the musk smell of early settling dew, the sharp pipe of the nighthawk, the choir of peepers, all choking me with beauty from without; while inside, my heart alive with the passion of a dream. Inside, inside the house, at last forgotten, at last. He must have dozed. With only the vague sense of someone sitting there beside me, his arm gently touching mine, the warmth of his

body mingling with the sweet warm touch of the air. Feeling in my breast the swell and lull of passion, tingling in the tips with maddening desire. And he, strong and calm and quiet, with all the strength of steel my soul and body yearned for, called for. He must have felt my passion, must have seen it in my eyes as I looked at him without seeing him, must have gone soft with wonder and delight as my breast brushed against his arm. And almost wept with love as I pulled him down off the steps and led him around to the west side of the house and lay down on the soft grass, pulling him down beside me. Hardly knowing that I did it mad with my dream and filled with the call for his strength. He there beside me on the grass fumbling to reach my lips, his great hand cupping my breast so gently as though it were a birdling, until I pulled his head hard to bring his lips against mine, and then the raging rush of passion, almost beside myself weeping and whimpering for want of all that his strength could give me all at once, a sudden rush like a tidal wave breaking into a seaside cave. That's how I wanted it, but it was all so slow at first. He must have known he was hurting me, but I didn't mind, wanting to feel his great body crushing me, as it did, and I writhing with love, twisting from the pain and rising with the pleasure. Ah, the pain, and then so sweet; the pain there and then sweet. The pain, and sweet. Until out of the great gulf of his passion I could feel the rising wave, higher and higher, and mine from the very depths of body and soul from years of yearning years of dreams the swift uprush of almost almighty passion meeting the

oncoming surge with an eagerness that even death could hardly halt, and then with my teeth clenched on his lips, his agonized groan, the final irresistible surge, the spasmodic locking of body to body, and my whole soul drowned in the deluge of his manly strength.

And then lying there spent, his body sagging limply over mine, and the taste of his blood on my lips..

His foolish babble then, lying beside me, fumbling to kiss me fondly, apologetically, reassuringly, shortly. And I cold and nerveless as the blade of grass under my hand. Answering his babble with a word. Married, yes, in the eyes of God. Yes, when? Tomorrow, no, next week -- married in the eyes of man. Who cares, but yes, then I suppose we must. And before he goes, ah yes -- he goes -- in two weeks -- and before then a whole week as man and wife. I'm cold. Come to me tomorrow. Then we'll talk.

Two weeks later, standing outside of Parks' Drug Store while he went inside to say goodbye to Papa Parks. He must have known then, even then that I didn't love him; something in his eyes, docile, all grateful, and yet uncertain, as though heaven had fallen at his feet and he doubted that it was really heaven. At the station, his eyes beseeching, wanting he knew not what -- a word of love perhaps, of love that I didn't have -- and I wishing him gone, already half way back to my world of dreams. At last he was on the train, and I turning my back on his last wave goodbye -- and I, his wife, but free again, back to my dream and to my father's house; all that behind,

never again to feel the wild sweep of passion, the devastating flaming -- nothing of that left but the taste of his blood on my mouth -- there in my father's house.

Weeks of sweet peace, and then the sudden fear, the clutching of the hand around my heart, the helpless rage, the sharp disgust, and over all the bitter knowledge that this was as it was to be and as I had known it would be -- as though all that had been self-punishment to be endured for life by my own choice. And though I said to myself, on the surface, it still may not be true, it may just be an irregularity, I knew that it was so and I was pregnant. I could trace the days and hours back to the very minute when it happened, when the climbing sperm had locked in urgent struggle with the egg. I felt a sharp twinge there; my womb seemed to turn within me. A film came across my eyes and I seemed to see my mother's face, but instead of being kind and gentle and loving and motherly, it had turned young again and was burning with spite and rage ready to eat my heart as though she knew what then I was thinking. And what was I thinking? Ah, it was all so different. I had thought till then of my mother, Ah when I see thy dear sweet face again all the love that I have in my heart for you, Mother, shall come to my eyes and my lips and my hands, and you shall know it, see it, return it. And then when I saw her there through the film, out of my heart there came a great victory-gloating that almost brought a scream of joy to my lips, and out of my heart to my lips and my eyes and my hands, to every nerve in my body swelled the flood of triumph -- without

my bidding, without my knowledge, twisting the smile of welcome on my lips into a triumphant sneer, and the word on my lips, Mother, turned suddenly into a scream that seemed to be rung out of my very heart, Bitch! And when I knew what I had said to my dead, what I had felt, every pore on my skin seemed to tighten at once and I fell down in a faint. How could I have said that, how could I have felt it? Somehow my mind had got all twisted up at that moment, and it seemed as though I hated my mother and had hated her all this time, loving my father, and in conceiving a child I had defeated her, as though Peter had taken the place of my father and this was my father's sperm within me, living, growing proof that she in the grave had at last been conquered. And yet I hated him, my father, hate him still.

Then I didn't realize that another hate was growing in me, didn't realize it until -- it was Mrs. Peers that made me know, and she knew too -- I was so sick then, all the time, as though a mountain of poison was belching in my womb, sickening me with every step I took, every day in the nine months.

Mrs. Peers was sorry for the young woman who was having such a nasty time of it. She, herself, hadn't been sick, not to speak of, a single day during the time she was carrying little Artie. If she had it to do over again, and she hoped she might if her husband ever came back to her or if she got another man, she wouldn't flinch at going through it any number of times. But she was grateful to Natalie's illness,

too, for if she hadn't been sick, Mrs. Peers wouldn't have had this job. Of course, jobs weren't scarce but this one was so easy and comfortable compared to some she might have got. Mr. Gordon never bothered her, and she hardly ever saw Natalie.

One Saturday night Mrs. Peers was giving Artie, four years and eight months, a bath in a big washtub on the kitchen table. It was half filled with sudsy water, and little Artie was standing naked on the table, watching her stir the water and test it with her hand. He was waiting the signal for him to step into the tub. At that moment, Natalie, who usually went directly to her bedroom after supper, surprised them by walking into the kitchen.

Natalie, surprisingly enough, had changed little in physical appearance. She made no attempt to hide her condition, but aside from the increased girth her pregnancy seemed to have little outward effect. Her complexion remained the same, except that her pallor, if possible, had deepened; her dark hair was still glossy and fastidiously combed. Mrs. Peers suspected that she spent much of her time in her room combing and caressing her hair. Moreover, she still retained much of the careless, almost tigrish grace that had formerly characterized her every movement; she seemed to disregard the burden she was carrying, moving softly and swiftly and with no sign of the flat-footed awkwardness that usually comes to pregnant women.

She had entered the kitchen noiselessly, and Mrs. Peers had an uncomfortable feeling that she might have been standing

in the doorway a long time watching her before she had stepped into the room. Mrs. Peers was a little flustered; her first thought was to throw a bathrobe over the naked child, and then she blushed at her own foolish notion. After all, he was only a baby.

"We're taking a bath," she said to Natalie, "our Saturday night bath." She swirled the soap around in the water vigorously. "Have to have plenty of suds 'cause we're awful dirty tonight, aren't we, Artie?"

Little Artie looked calmly at his mother without saying anything. Then he turned his eyes back to Natalie. He was entirely unembarrassed.

"We played out in the yard all day," she continued, "and we got awful wet in the snow. Didn't we, Artie? We got soaked right to the skin. And we're going to be sick unless we get a good hot bath and go right to bed."

Natalie had been gazing fixedly at the little boy. Suddenly she turned to Mrs. Peers and spoke.

"Why do you talk to him like a little baby? He isn't a baby any more."

Mrs. Peers was startled. It was the first time she had heard Natalie speak in two weeks, and her question was direct, cold, spoken as though she expected, even demanded, an answer.

"Why," she stumbled, "it's -- it's the way I -- talk to him."

At this point, Artie, who had put his foot up on the rim of the big wooden tub as though poised to jump in, on looking

around at Natalie, lost his balance and almost fell to the floor. He saved himself by grasping the rim of the tub with both hands. Mrs. Peers lunged for him and grabbed his arm. Natalie, with a little scream, glided forward swift as thought and caught hold of him under the arms with both hands. The two women stood there facing each other, each holding the child. Mrs. Peers laughed with relief.

"See," she said, "he's just a baby. He can't even stand up."

A rare smile came to Natalie's lips. For a moment her face was warm and beautiful..

"Of course," she said. "Just a baby." She withdrew her supporting hands, and then almost bashfully she looked at the mother. "May I give him his bath?" she asked.

Mrs. Peers looked at her son doubtfully. "He's awful dirty," she said. "Do you want Miss Gordon to give you your bath?"

Artie nodded.

"Better put on an apron," Mrs. Peers said, relinquishing her hold on her son.

Natalie put on an apron that was hanging in a corner. She lifted the child into the tub and made him sit down in the warm water.

"Face first," she said, wielding the dripping wash cloth. The little fellow submitted to her docilely and unconsciously, as though it were an everyday occurrence. His mother sat down in a chair near the table.

"He's a good boy," said Mrs. Peers. "He never makes a fuss about his bath. Takes after his father that way." She stopped to sigh. "He took a bath three times a week, regular. Kept me busy heating water for him. Artie, don't rub your eyes with your hands; you'll get soap in them. Isn't his head dirty, though, Miss Gordon!"

Natalie paid no attention to her. She seemed unaware that there was anyone else in the room besides herself and the boy. She went about the washing industriously, thoroughly. There was a strange look in her eyes, which Mrs. Peers noticed with some uneasiness; a look of excitement, a look almost of fierceness. The smile had gone from her lips, and now they were pressed so tightly together that they had become white like her face. She looked, Mrs. Peers thought, as though she were forcing herself, as though she were determined to do what she was doing and determined to make herself enjoy it.

With a strange white intentness Natalie leaned over the tub and went about her work. She bent slightly at the waist and her head was bowed far down so that she could see better in the dim, one-bulb light of the kitchen; but her shoulders were straight and she had to reach with her arms; she looked at the same time conscientious and withdrawn as though half of her nature was repulsed and in conflict with the other half. She was very gentle with the boy, if a little stiff and awkward.

At first little Artie accepted the situation as a matter of course, in his usual placid, undemonstrative manner. He patted the water curiously and played unconcernedly with the

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soap.. When Natalie stood him up to wash his shoulders and stomach, he let his eyes wander unconcernedly around the room and looked at her coolly. After a while, however, something of Natalie's mood seemed to affect him, or else he caught the worried, almost furtive look of his mother as she watched the process from her chair. In any case, he began to show a little nervousness, looking at his mother anxiously and casting a quick, uncertain glance at Natalie's strained face.

Natalie still said nothing, although under her breath she seemed to be humming almost soundlessly through her closed lips. She placed one of his hands on her neck so that he could hold on while she washed first one foot and then the other. Artie submitted, although the proximity seemed to frighten him; he seemed fascinated by the black sheen of her long hair, and once he almost lost his balance as he tried to reach up with his other hand, as though hypnotized, to touch it.

Having finished washing his feet, Natalie straightened up slowly. The boy's hand slipped down from her neck -- he seemed not to have the strength to draw it away -- and rested stiffly for a moment on her breast. She was still for a moment, letting his hand stay there. Then the boy seemed to recover his volition and he pulled his hand away.

Natalie lifted him out of the tub and onto the table. She snatched the big bath towel lying at one end of the table and began to dry him. By this time the little fellow was trembling, whether with cold or with fright, and he continually looked anxiously at his mother, who was nervously watching, pinning

and unpinning a safety pin which she had stuck in the breast of her apron. Natalie buried his head in the fluffy towel and began to press it gently around his ears, and the rest of his face.

At this point the little fellow's legs buckled under him, he sank to his knees, and he uttered a weak little half-smothered cry. Mrs. Peers sprang up, unable to restrain herself. Natalie snatched the towel from his face, flung it around his body, and stood him on his feet.

"What's the matter?" she muttered, through clenched teeth. Her face was contorted with emotion; fear seemed to predominate, but there was present also an unholy joy that seemed on the point any moment of breaking into wild, uncontrollable laughter.

Little Artie was deathly pale, but he managed to gasp out a bewildered word. "I couldn't see," he said. He was on the point of tears. His mother stood there a moment undecided while Natalie went on with the drying, vigorously rubbing the little body until it was red and shiny. Mrs. Peers went back to her chair and sat down with a grim expression on her face.

The drying finished, Natalie looked around for his night shirt, found it, and put it on him. Then she picked him up in her arms and followed Mrs. Peers into the bedroom adjoining the kitchen.

"Afraid?" she asked the little fellow in a sing-song voice. "Don't be afraid. See, nothing will hurt you." And she pressed him warmly against her breast.

Little Artie looked at her, fascinated and yet afraid.

Mrs. Peers pulled back the cover of one of the beds, and Natalie placed him gently down on his back and pulled the covers over him.

Mrs. Peers watched her as Natalie deftly tucked him in.

"You goin' to thank Miss Gordon for washin' you?" she said.

The boy seemed unable to bring himself to the task. Natalie leaned over him.

"Kiss?" she said. She bent down and kissed him on the mouth. His hand pulled out from the covers and strayed up toward her hair. She kissed the palm of his hand and pushed it back under the covers.

Natalie straightened up and turned toward Mrs. Peers. She took a step as though to go out, staggered and almost fell. Her face was pasty, her brow beaded with sweat, and her mouth hung open, loose and helpless.

"I'm going to be sick," she gasped. "I'm going to throw up."

Mrs. Peers supported her to the kitchen sink. Natalie retched, and the tears of helpless fury streamed from her eyes. At last she fell back into a chair, weak, relaxed, disgusted. Mrs. Peers washed her face and dried it; she had stopped crying. Into her eyes had come a vague blur, as though a thin film had been drawn over them. She stared unseeingly into space while Mrs. Peers hovered over her, distracted now that there was nothing she could do.

At last Natalie looked up at her unseeingly, and Mrs. Peers was startled at the vagueness, the senselessness that

she saw in the poor woman's eyes.

"What do you want?" said Natalie. "Why are you looking at me? Go away."

Mrs. Peers hurriedly left, going into her son's room and closing the door.

Then, ah, then for the first time I knew for sure what I had dimly known before. Then rose up in me the sharp disgust, the gorge of all the hate I'd inward felt for all those years, that choked me, sickened me, no matter how I tried and strove against it. The thought of a child was like the thought of death; the fingers of a child on my neck my breast were like the fingers of a corpse; I felt as though I were handling then a sickening evil-smelling body that had been dead for months. It was the smell of the bleeding womb, the dried life-blood from a deadly wound -- the choking, gagging smell of death. Then I felt it, the hate, the keen disgust; and ever since. The twins -- God help them -- Albert and Eileen, who never knew a mother's love. And I, who never felt what other mothers feel, the all-consuming, all-sacrificing mother-love; nothing but an all-consuming hate, that even now, even now-----

XII

In the warm afternoon sun, which had appeared hesitantly shortly before noon and then had become gloriously steady at about two, Eric walked slowly up the road toward the Cadwell home. The road was already dry, but the dirt shoulders were still soft and wet and the trees and bushes still looked damp and sodden. Eric thought he caught an occasional hint of green in some of the trees; the buds should soon be out.

He had dressed himself carefully for his visit, putting on a new dark suit which he had bought in town earlier in the week, a white shirt, and a green knit tie. He looked almost dapper as he walked along the road in his gray tweed topcoat and dark gray felt hat; his face had taken on some color during the week, and his gray eyes were clear and calm.

In spite of his appearance of physical well-being, however, he was still restless and hesitant in his mind. Yesterday at this time lying in the open field on the little hillock in back of his house he had felt at peace with the world. Everything that he had looked at, the sky and the fields and the woods, had all seemed good to him; through his mind as he lay there had passed in review all the people that he knew, and they had all seemed kind, friendly people, good and tolerant, sympathetic with him, and even devoted to him. He had felt then that his heart was hardly big enough to hold all the

gratitude and love that he felt for them. All the world of people and things seemed to be united in contributing to his well-being. But since yesterday a change had come, as though suddenly the world had turned against him.

He was sensible enough to know that the change existed primarily in his own mind, but he also knew that it was due to something outside himself, and he tried to trace the cause. For one thing, yesterday he had given way to that mysterious but irresistible frenzy which contact with the woods always excited in him; and the sudden exaltation and the subsequent shame had drained away the confidence he had felt in himself, leaving a vague disturbance in his mind that showed itself for several hours afterwards in an attack of physical weakness that set his hands trembling and produced a nervous twitching in his muscles.

His walk with Cleone, though, their brief visit to the cemetery and the subsequent reconciliation, had almost succeeded in calming him. He had felt a quiet joy in regaining his cousin's good opinion; for, although it pained him to be at variance with anyone, Cleone's silent disapproval was even more than usually painful to him.

But the scene at the Mattison home had again shaken his equanimity. The grief of the parents -- the uncertain bitterness of the father and the brave acceptance of the inevitable by the mother -- combined with the peculiarly unsatisfying appearance of the dead child had depressed him. And then Eileen's strange manner and her irrelevant outburst against him,

as though her sole purpose at that time was to injure him in the eyes of those present, had shaken and confused him. He could not understand her, and now he feared her.

He wondered, too, why Cleone had said nothing to him that morning about the evening before. They had walked home in almost complete silence, Eric plunged in gloomy thought, and Cleone evidently not choosing to talk, and this morning while they played and chatted she had not alluded to Eileen or to the Mattisons.

So completely had he changed from yesterday's mood that now as he walked he felt overwhelmingly that the whole world had turned against him and that everyone was conspiring to ruin him. He felt a surge of panic, and he stopped by the side of the road, feeling too weak to go on. A car, going the same way that he was going, sped past him, but he didn't notice it. All that registered on his mind was the mist-shrouded mountains in the east, which were still enveloped by rainclouds, and it seemed to him that instead of lifting with the clearing sun the mist was settling even more densely over the mountains and would soon hide them, root and peak, from the bright smile of the sun here in the west. But with an effort he pulled himself together, conquered his unreasonable fear, and continued walking.

As Eric approached the Cadwell house, he saw Tim standing out in the front yard surveying the countryside and the sky with a speculative air. He greeted Eric in his usual undemonstrative manner. At any other time Eric would have seen by his

eyes that the old man was glad to see him, but in his present depressed state he was disagreeably impressed by the casual greeting..

"That's all there is," the old man drawled. "When the mist starts risin' offa the hills in the east there's a clear spell comin', providin' there's nothing comin' up outa the west."

Eric looked to the west. The Adirondacks were so sharply clear that he felt he could reach out his hand and touch them.

"Come on in," Tim said, leading the way; "She's all set to give you hell."

Mrs. Cadwell left no doubt in his mind as to whether he was welcome. He had hardly stepped inside the door when she leaped up out of her chair with a shriek and folded him to her capacious bosom in a great bear-hug that left him breathless. As she kissed him on the cheek and he returned the kiss, he felt the tears starting to his eyes, and he blinked them back.

"It's about time," Mrs. Cadwell said, in a kindly scolding voice as she released him. "But I've promised Tim not to scold you and I won't, but I ought to for waitin' all this time to come and see me."

She looked him up and down critically, and Eric smiled, feeling suddenly at home.

"You're thin," she said accusingly, as though it was his fault, "and peaked. You've got to get some meat on your bones. You're worse than Tim, and heaven knows I feed him well enough,

and he eats like a horse. You should drink more milk. "Wouldn't you like a glass of milk? Well, later then. If you won't look after yourself, somebody's got to do it for you."

She made him pull an easy chair close to her rocker, and then she sat down and resumed her darning, keeping up a running stream of chatter interspersed with questions. Tim had gone out to do some chores around his little farm; and Eric sat in the neat, cozy living room next to Mrs. Cadwell, leaning back in his chair completely at ease, holding fast to the pleasure that the motherly affection of his old friend had given him.

The years hadn't changed her, as far as he could see, in the slightest. Her hair was still almost free from gray. The wrinkles in her broad, kindly face had deepened a little, her black eyes were a little less expressive, more opaque, and her big body seemed not quite so soft and full as it had been six years before. But otherwise she was the same -- full of energy, kindness, mixed with hard-headed practicality, and full of the wisdom of years tamped down with sorrow. She still believed, as she expressed it, that today, no matter how bad it is, is a better day than yesterday, for the simple reason that yesterday is gone and today is still within our grasp. Let the dead past bury its dead. She was still nappy..

In a little less than an hour and a half Mrs. Cadwell told him of all the important events that had happened during the six years of his absence. New houses, big fires, births, deaths, marriages, past and present business conditions of

Keton, new families moved in, old families moved out -- all this and more, much of which he knew already but all of which interested him. Their own affairs, she told him, were in good shape. Tim had made a good thing out of the apple orchard and now had a big market for his apples, which paid the expenses of the farm. Besides that he had a small garden, which he took care of himself, four cows, a few chickens, and two horses. He did his own haying, plowing, milking, and whatever else there was to do around the place; and all in all they were comfortable, financially secure, and very well content with what life had given them. And they both counted on enjoying that life for a good many years to come -- here Eric thought he caught a note of defiance in the old lady's voice, and he wondered if they were both in good health. He was to learn later from Tim that during the winter his wife had suffered a stroke, heart attack, which had laid her up for three weeks, and the doctor had warned her to be careful...

Finally Mrs. Cadwell tucked her darning into her sewing basket and got up.

"I've got to start supper," she said. "I've got something you like."

Eric hadn't planned to stay for supper, but now he couldn't see how he could get out of it without hurting his friend's feelings. And besides he found that he wanted to stay.

"I didn't intend -- "

"Now, don't say no," Mrs. Cadwell said briskly. "I've been counting on you staying. And besides -- "

She didn't finish, but he guessed that Eileen would be there for supper.

"You can come out in the kitchen with me or you can stay here, whichever you like."

But just then Tim came in and asked if he would like to take a look around the farm. Eric consented.

"I'd like to call my mother up first and tell her that I'm staying for supper."

"You go right along with Tim," Mrs. Cadwell said. "I'll call her up myself. It'll soon be dark and you won't be able to see a thing. -- Why don't you take the milking pails with you now so you won't have to come back in," she added to her husband.

Eric found the trip around the farm intensely interesting.

He estimated that Tim owned about seven or eight acres of land, every foot of which was carefully tended and was exceptionally productive. Back of the house and a little to one side was the small two-story barn, the upper story used as a haymow and the lower housing the cows and horses and the farm utensils. Farther to the left was the neat white chicken-coop and running parallel to the road was a strip of freshly plowed land with rich looking soil, about a hundred yards long and forty yards wide. This was the main garden, but there were several other strips of plowed land at intervals behind the house that were evidently subsidiary gardens, not so large as the main one, some of them only thirty or forty feet

square. Occupying several acres of land behind the house, row upon row of apple trees stretched out to form the orchard. On the other side of the house was a fenced pasture for the cows and horses, and in back of the orchard was the hayfield.

Tim showed him through the barn first, depositing the milk pails on the concrete floor near the feed bin.

"It's different from when you saw it last," Tim said. "I've put in a new floor, new stanchions and stables, and patched it up everyplace that it needed it." There was a quiet pride in his voice that he tried to conceal.

The cows were not yet in their places, but Eric could hear the stamp of the horses in their wooden stalls in back and he heard one of them nicker as they entered the barn.

"Horses are hungry," Tim said, "and restless. They ain't been able to do nothin' all day but stand in their stalls; too wet to do any harrowin'.

"Got four cows now," he went on, sticking a strand of hay into his toothless mouth. "All registered and tested. 'Member Bessie."

He was alluding, Eric knew, to the single cow he'd had when Eric had last seen him. Eric nodded.

"Had to get rid of her. She kept breakin' out of the pasture and gettin' into the orchard. I sold her and got two more. And then the year after that I got two more. That's all I want now."

Tim showed him the horses. They were heavy draft horses, powerful, intelligent looking brutes..

"They do all my work for me, hayin', plowin', harrowin'; they even dragged the hen-house over from the other side of the house when I wanted to move it."

Then they climbed a ladder to the hayloft, which was still well stocked in spite of the heavy drag which the winter had put upon it. Tim opened the wide front door of the loft to let in the light. Through the door Eric could see the house and the road in front of it, and far beyond were the Green Mountains, grown slightly hazy now with the approaching dusk but entirely free of this afternoon's mist. In the same way he felt that the mist had cleared from his mind, leaving him now calm and tranquil, with only the memory of the day's earlier turmoil and panic. It was this memory, though, that kept him from giving way to the feeling of exhilaration that came over him as he realized how contented he had suddenly become; this memory chastened him like a mother's warning finger shaken at a child who has just been punished: "Stop or I'll do it again."

Tim returned to his side. "This is where I do most of my heavy thinkin'," he said, pointing to a corner of the loft, where the hay still bore the imprint of his body. "It's quiet, it smells good, and I like it. So I come here when I want to be alone."

Eric agreed with him. "Just the place. Ideal."

As they continued the inspection of the barn and then walked about the grounds outside, Eric ventured to broach the subject which had been on his mind for some time. He had been

wondering more and more frequently of late what he ought to do with his time, what work he could possibly take up that would give him pleasure and at the same time be useful, in short, what he might make his life-work. He had thought of various things he could do, but almost always his mind had come back to farming, as though that was the most attractive prospect, considering his handicaps and considering his capabilities. As he surveyed Tim's neat little farm, and basked in the quiet atmosphere that pervaded the whole place, he became convinced that he was not mistaken, that this was the ideal way of life. And no sooner was he convinced than he felt the pressing need of occupying himself at once, or very soon, in some useful absorbing work, something that would tax him physically without putting too much of a strain upon him nervously.

He talked it over with Tim as they stood in the orchard between two rows of trees.

"Yes," said Tim. "It could be done. There's plenty of room in that garage of yours for a hayloft, upstairs; it used to be a barn anyway, before your father bought it. And you've still got stanchion room for four or five cows --"

"Four," Eric said.

"And two horse stalls. It could be done all right. Take a little fixin' and plannin'."

"We have plenty of land."

"It's gonna take a few years before that land's producin' up to scratch; it's all run to seed and roots. But there's

good dirt there, just like mine. You could put a good big garden in there back of the barn, big as you'd want. You could make a corn field out of that lot on the south side, and that field beyond your flower garden has always been a good hayfield. I mow it every year, but I ain't been able to find use for the hay lately; got all I need right here."

Eric added, "The orchard ought to be pruned up and thinned out a little."

"That could be a mighty fine orchard if anyone had time to take the proper care of it. Lord knows I've done my best, but there's an awful lot of waste to it. Could be just as good as this one with the proper care."

The old man pushed his hat back on his head with a characteristic gesture and patted his bald head thoughtfully.

"Course all that takes time," he said, "and a whole lot of work. Maybe a little money, too."

The sun had just settled behind the Adirondacks, and though the sunset was hidden from the two men by the orchard behind them they could see the purple haze cloaking the Green Mountains in the east, and Eric thrilled to the beauty of the scene. This aspect of the sunset was as beautiful to him as the more spectacular glory of the western skies. No sooner had the sun settled behind the mountains than dusk seemed to leap across the land. Eric, coatless and hatless, shivered in the damp of the early evening, and the two men started toward the barn.

"I've got to milk," Tim said.

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"Can I help you?" Eric said.

Tim, looking at Eric's clothes, said, "No, but you can keep me company."

Together they drove the four cows from the pasture on the north side of the house into their stanchions in the barn. Tim fed them and sat down to milk.

"How should I go about it?" Eric asked, referring to his plans for starting a farm of his own.

"Is your mother agreeable?"

"Well, I'm quite sure she wouldn't object. She'd be glad to see me do something like that, I think."

"Yes, I think she would," Tim said reflectively. "Your mother's a mighty fine woman, and she'd give the world to see her son happy."

Eric was glad that the barn was half dark as he felt the flush of embarrassment creep into his cheeks. Tim reflected for some time and then began to outline his recommendations.

"First you'd have to plow up all the land you intended to use for garden," he said, "and harrow it and fertilize it, but don't plant anything for the first year. Then do the same thing in the fall."

Eric listened carefully to the old man's advice, which he gave freely, in spasmodic doses as he milked the cows. He would have to have help, he would have to have money, he would have to buy a team of horses and maybe later a couple of cows and some chickens. He would have to hire a tree surgeon for some expert pruning on the orchard. He would have to make

repairs on the barn. All this and much more he would have to do, and with very little return for his first year of labor. But next year this time he would be ready and the farm would be ready.

Tim would be glad to help him whenever he needed help, but the first year would be the hardest.

"Then I could show you where to pick up some good seed for next year. You'd want to lay up a good stock of seed this fall."

Eric sat in silent reflection while Tim finished his milking, fed the horses, and bedded down all the animals with liberal forkfulls of hay. He considered that he was on the verge of a serious decision, and he wanted to give it careful thought before taking the step -- and he wanted to talk it over with his mother, although he didn't doubt for a minute that she would heartily acquiesce. Many times before farming had seemed attractive to him, but never before had it seemed so nearly within his grasp as a way of life. The simple, quiet tenor of the life, the heavy physical work, that would keep him out of doors much of the time, the close association with animals and nature -- all this appealed to him and always had. As for his mental growth, he could see to that when his outward life had become more stable and practical.

Tim strained the milk into a big milk can, and together they hoisted the can into a trough of running water at one side of the barn.

"I leave it there until morning," Tim said. "We have a

few customers who come for eggs and milk. What's left she makes into butter and cheese." By "She" he meant Mollie, his wife.

Tim carried the empty milk pails toward the house, Eric walking beside him.

"She scalds them every night," Tim said, indicating the pails.

Halfway between the barn and the house they were hailed by a boyish voice from the orchard. Straining his eyes, Eric made out the figure of a boy standing near the trees and waving his arm.

"Hi, Tim," the boy shouted. "Got any apples."

"You better get home," Tim shouted back, "or your dad'll be out after you."

The boy laughed and shot away, zigzagging at the top of his speed among the apple trees.

"That's Will Ashley's boy," Tim said, as they went on.

"He's a likable little devil, but a hellion if I ever saw one."

With the mention of the postman, Eric's thoughts leaped to Eileen. She was probably in the house. How should he greet her, and how would she greet him?

They entered the house through the back way, into the kitchen. Eileen was there, helping Mrs. Cadwell. Her gay laugh rang in Eric's ears as he followed Tim through the door.

How different she was tonight from what she had been last night. She turned to him as he came in, paying no attention

to Tim who walked directly to the sink and deposited the milk pails. Her eyes were brimming with laughter, and her face was the picture of gaiety. She left what she was doing to help Mrs. Cadwell and hurried over to him with a smile of welcome. She took his hand and held it as though he were an old friend and she hadn't seen him for a long time.

"I thought you'd never come in," she said. "I've been here for almost an hour. I hurried right up from work without even stopping to change my dress."

Eric felt confused and embarrassed but at the same time delightfully happy. He didn't want to meet her eyes, but he couldn't take his gaze from her face. He couldn't believe that this was happening; it was so different from what he had expected.

"Take care of Eric," Mollie called from her post at the stove. "Take him into the living room. Supper's in a half hour."

Eileen started to lead him into the living room, still holding his hand. She stopped suddenly.

"Look," she said, pointing down, "your feet are dirty. Go clean them -- I'll wait for you in the living room."

He hurried back outside and brushed his shoes, rubbing the soles in the dry grass. He could feel his cheeks burning with chagrin, but he could feel a ridiculous smile creasing his mouth and he was on the point of laughing.

Eileen was sitting demurely in the easy chair he had occupied most of the afternoon, and she motioned for him to

come and sit near her, in Mrs. Cadwell's chair. She looked younger and fresher than he had ever seen her before; there was something school-girlish about the way her lips kept smiling crookedly at him. In her eyes he was sure that he could read genuine pleasure; she wasn't mocking him nor trying to make him feel ridiculous. She seemed to be in a state of extreme excitement and in fine spirits, but she was obviously making an effort to hold herself within bounds.

She offered a cigarette from a silver case after he had sat down beside her, and when he refused she lit one herself.

"Would you rather I didn't smoke?" she asked seriously.

He shook his head, noticing that she was ready to put it out.

"I don't really need them; I just smoke to have something to do with my hands. And it quiets my nerves. Our house is always full of smoke, anyway; Albert smokes one right after another. He's a fiend. I have something to tell you, something important; but later on -- I don't want to be serious now."

"I've been looking forward to this," she avowed frankly, the same peculiar smile hovering on her lips. "I've wanted to talk to you. It's going to be such a pleasant evening." She settled back in her chair luxuriously, letting her head fall back and closing her eyes briefly. "This is so pleasant.. You see --" she went on talking dreamily -- "I've thought about you quite a lot, ever since I met you on the train, and I've reached the conclusion that you're really a good person, with a good heart -- and that's important. There are so many bad

people in the world, not really bad but with something nasty in their hearts. You're almost too good to be true."

She paused, and he tried to think of something to say. He became aware that she was looking at him from under her half-closed lids with a searching, penetrating glance that completely shattered the illusion she had created.

"You're wondering why I'm acting like this," she said abruptly, "after being so nasty to you last night."

"No," Eric said, "No, I... really...."

"You were," she answered. "Yes, you were. You think that I'm acting now. You think..."

Eric broke in. "I know why you were... why you said what you did last night. I know that."

"You know?" She smiled incredulously, and the cynical twist of her lips Eric noticed with distaste.

"And I know that now, just now, you weren't acting but were your real self. I know that too."

She looked at him for a long time, saying nothing. He wondered what she was thinking, and he wondered at himself for speaking so surely when he felt so far from sure. He heard someone moving around upstairs and guessed that Tim was cleaning up for supper.

"And do you know why my brother likes you?" she asked.

He shook his head, mystified at the sudden shift. Again the searching, almost crafty glance.

"Talk about something else," she said, signing and turning her head to one side as though she were going to take a nap.

For some time he could think of nothing to say, his attention unwillingly caught by the smoking end of the cigarette in the ashtray, which she had only half put out.

"Well?" she said, without turning her head.

"How long have you known the Mattisons?" he ventured, and then recollected that she wanted a pleasant subject. He was totally unprepared for her reaction. She sat up eagerly, and her eyes shined again with their previous joyful light.

"Oh, for ages," she exclaimed, and then she burst into a delighted laugh. "I'm so happy about them. Oh, it was sad, of course --" suddenly lowering her voice -- "losing the child. She was such a dear. I really loved her more than I loved any child in my life. But something else happened --" again she was delighted -- "You can't imagine, but it made me so happy. They'll have another one. People say she can't, but she can; she wants one, and she's determined to have it. And now everything is all right."

Eric was completely at sea. For a moment he doubted her sanity, and he studied her closely. Noticing his glance, she became serious.

"You can't understand. All you see is the sad part, but there's another side to it that means an awful lot to me. I know how sad it is, and one minute I feel like crying over little Mary and the next minute I'm filled with joy because of the other."

She lit another cigarette.

"When I first met her, Martha," Fileen settled back in

her chair, "she was wheeling Mary around in a carriage on North Street. I met her there quite often, and we used to stop and talk, and I'd talk to the baby. We became friends, all three of us, and I visited them once in a while, and then more often. When Mary was three years old, her father was out of work for a whole year, and consequently he was around the house whenever I visited. He began to pay quite a lot of attention to me... I don't know... seeing me so often I guess he thought he was in love with me... anyway people began to talk... I don't know how it happened... and then Martha began to notice it. And finally Martha told me plainly what people were saying and what she suspected, and I told her I'd never come there again."

She was silent for a short time.

"There was nothing really wrong," she continued, looking at him pleadingly. "All that they said was untrue. The thought never entered my head. You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes."

She looked at him searchingly, and, satisfied, went on. "That was almost three years ago, and I hadn't been to see her once until last week. As soon as I heard, I went to her, and she knew that I came only to see her. We were reconciled; all the doubts she ever had of her husband and of me disappeared. And now..."

She stopped, and Eric waited.

"And now it's like a new life starting for her. She has a terrible wound, but she has faith, and I think that she's happy."

Eric was shocked by the childish simplicity of her view, and the selfishness of it. She was so relieved at the reconciliation with her friend, so joyful with the realization that she need no longer feel guilty for having come between her friend and her friend's husband, that she thought even the death of the child would have to take second place in the mind of the mother. She was interpreting the feelings of others in the light of her own. It was even hard to tell whether she was genuinely affected by little Mary's death.

She was waiting for him to say something.

"I understand," he said vaguely. "It must have been hard for you."

"It was," she said, and her eyes filled with tears.

"People talked about me, about us, when there wasn't -- " At one moment she seemed on the point of crying, and then in another she was the living image of spite and rage --. "But never mind what people say," she said fiercely. "Those damned dirty-minded cats would point their dirty fingers at Christ himself. They..." She sputtered with anger and indignation.

At that moment Eric felt that he had a glimpse of a tortured soul. And the next moment Mollie Cadwell called them to supper.

"I have something to tell you after supper," Eileen whispered, tugging on his sleeve as they went in to the dining room.

"You here, Eileen, and you here, Eric," Mollie said, pointing to their places. "And now where's Tim?"

"Tim," she called, "are you comin'? We're not waitin' for you. Let's sit down."

Tim came downstairs at a stiff-legged canter and took his place at the table.

After supper there was no chance for Eileen to talk with him privately. Tim ensconced himself in an easy chair in the living room and smoked his pipe, and Eric joined him while the two women did the dishes.

The two men talked in low, drowsy, after-dinner voices. Eric outlined to the older man his plans for the future, most of which were not definitely set in his mind but which took on an added clearness as he talked. And Tim, a patient listener, offered a suggestion here and there.

As Eric conversed with his old friend, he became more and more optimistic about the future, and his plan for making a farm on his mother's grounds seemed more and more feasible and attractive. Occasionally he paused to dream, and the silence was unbroken save for the sucking noise of Tim's pipe, and the subdued murmur of the women's voices in the kitchen. He had not felt so content since his return to Keton. The uncertainty, the fear, and the doubt of this afternoon had all vanished, for the time being, and in their place he felt a quiet hope.

In this mood the evening passed swiftly. Soon Mrs. Cadwell and Eileen joined them, and a quiet, pleasant conversation ensued.

During most of the evening Eric sat opposite Eileen with the whole room between them. She was sitting with Mrs. Cadwell in the soft, roomy divan, and she leaned over toward the older woman every once in a while to examine the crocheting that Mrs. Cadwell was doing. They seemed on excellent terms, and it was quite obvious that old Mrs. Cadwell had a sincere affection for Eileen.

Tim sat by, quietly smoking his pipe and speaking only at rare intervals, peacefully content to be a quiescent part of this comfortable domestic scene. Once he bestirred himself long enough to light a fire in the fireplace, and then he settled back in his chair for the rest of the evening.

Eileen had lost her excited animation of a couple of hours before. Although she talked freely, not once did her emotional temperament break through the calm which she had assumed. Her conduct and manner were irreproachable. She seemed happy, thoughtful, and a little wistful.

Eric thought her in this mood more attractive than ever. He had ample opportunity to study her, for whenever he looked at her she dropped her eyes, refusing to meet his. Occasionally, though, he looked up from his own thoughts to find that she was studying him, and for the brief moment that he looked into her eyes at these times he thought he saw frank curiosity and perhaps even a faint flash of approval. Looking at her, he was struck as never before by the strange contradictions in her facial appearance. The symmetry of her face, although almost perfect, was marred by faint lines on each side of her

mouth, which seemed at one time to be lines of mirth, at another to be lines of pain, and still again to reveal an unpleasant cynicism. Her eyes were alive with expression, but they were the only part of her face which could be said to speak. Not once did he see a sign of color in her cheeks; her face was a beautiful mask.

Her black hair was straight but abundant, and she wore it parted in the middle. Her lips were delightfully curved and fairly full, and her teeth, though rather large, were straight, even, and brilliantly white.

Eric found it pleasant to look at her, but at the same time puzzling. Sometimes he seemed to be looking at the face of a child, a simple, adorable, petulant youngster, a little spoiled but still lovable; again he would see her as a young girl of fifteen or sixteen, innocent and naive, and full of youthful zest; and then at rare intervals, he would see in her a premature sophistication, bought at the cost of all worthwhile illusions, the sophistication that one might see in a ten-year-old street gamin who has knocked every day at the back door of the world and found it too easily opened. And there was something harsher, too, in her face, that Eric saw with pain and disgust, although he couldn't name it; it was something realistic and bitter, something that recognized evil and liked it.

The time came, though, when the conversation lagged, and the older people showed signs of drowsiness. It was nine-thirty, and the Cadwell's bedtime was ten.

Eileen and Eric took their leave, after repeated invitations to come again. Eric promised to come very soon, and he meant it; and he promised to see that Eileen arrived safely at her door. Arm in arm they walked in the bright moonlight down the road toward Keton.

It was some time before either of them spoke. Finally Eileen broke the silence.

"Mr. Burton thinks you're a first-rate fellow," she said.

Eric was surprised. "Why he doesn't even know me."

"Yes he does. He knows everybody in Keton, and knows more about them than they think he does. He's not a bad man, you know; he has enemies, but he's better than they are. People are jealous of him and afraid of him. That's why they don't like him."

"I don't know him at all," Eric said. "Just to recognize him when I see him -- and well enough to say hello."

"He knows you, though. He told me a lot of interesting things about you, things you did when you were a boy -- younger. He's the one who told me about the cabin you built for Jonnny Kinney."

Eric wondered how he knew, but she didn't give him a chance to ask.

"He told me about your father, too, and your mother -- and about my father."

She thought for a while, and in silence they passed the driveway to Eric's house. He could see a light in the living room and one upstairs.

"I think I would have liked your father better than mine," she said.

Eric knew nothing of Eileen's father except that he had been killed in the war.

"And how about your mother," he said, and the next moment could have bitten off his tongue for his lack of tact.

Eileen didn't seem to mind. "My mother once told me, and I think later she told Albert the same thing -- she said, 'Your father was a great man, Eileen; I want you to remember that. He was the strongest man in Keton, -- and yet he was very gentle -- he died for his country; that's all you need to know and all you have to remember.' I think that was the only moment I ever felt close to my mother, and I never felt it again. She must have loved my father terribly -- you believe that, don't you?" Still holding his arm, she twisted around and peered into his face. She seemed to give special importance to his answer.

"Yes of course," he said quickly.

She seemed relieved. "That's the only way to explain it," she went on, walking naturally again. "It must have almost killed her to lose him. They say -- someone told me -- she was almost out of her mind at the time. And so, naturally, since she loved him so much, so terribly, we weren't enough to take his place -- " she laughed without bitterness -- "A poor substitute. And she grew to hate us."

"She doesn't hate you," Eric objected.

"But she does. And that's the reason. She still loves

her husband so much, my father. It's cracked her mind."

Eric couldn't find any logic in her reasoning, but he thought it unwise to argue. Perhaps she was right, and if not, any other explanation would not be as satisfying.

"I don't mind, though," Eileen continued. "It seems strange for a mother -- but I don't mind. I see the reason. Albert is the one who minds. I think down deep in his heart he loves her and wants her love, but he hates her for what she's doing to his life and has done. It hurts his sense of what ought to be." She emphasized the words. "He's bugs on that, you know. He hates her for it, and he hates me for the same reason. We are both contrary to his sense of what ought to be. His respectability. That's his theme with me, day after day, respectability. You can't imagine the things he calls me."

Eric was shocked when she burst into a gale of laughter, so loud and raucous that he instinctively looked around to see if anyone was near to hear them. He fought off a feeling of disgust that almost nauseated him, and at the end he pitied her.

"But you know," she gasped between fits of laughter. "You know -- he's said them to you. He gave you the whole line on the train the other day -- my whole genealogy -- and all my faults from A to Z -- He loves me too, but you wouldn't believe it." And she was suddenly sober.

They passed the cemetery in silence. Only after they had gone by did Eric remember to look for the light he had seen

the night before, but he couldn't find it. Perhaps the moon was too bright. Eileen began to hum the tune of a popular song. It was as though her thoughts had drifted to gayer things, to adventure, and the bright life of dancing and night clubs. Again Eric felt disgusted with her.

"I wanted to tell you something," she said, "but now I don't know whether to tell you or not."

She continued her humming, and Eric, exasperated, felt like shaking her.

"Why shouldn't you tell me now, if you wanted to tell me before?"

"I may have changed my mind; I've been planning to do something -- that's what I wanted to tell you about -- but now I may have changed my mind about doing it." More humming.

"Well, that's all right," said Eric, forcing himself to speak gently in spite of the fact that her present mood irritated him.

"But first I want to tell you that I'm sorry for being so mean to you last night."

"That's nothing."

"Yes, it is something," she flashed. "Why are you always so kind to everybody -- don't you realize it when people are being mean to you? Why don't you hit back at them?"

"Well," he faltered, "people usually... have a reason.... a reason for being nasty... and they just want to take it out on somebody... It might be nothing that I've done, nothing at all, except that they've been hurt... and somehow or other,

maybe just at that moment, they associate me with it. And so they say something mean... not that they have anything against me; they would just as soon say it to anyone else. It's a relief for them. It doesn't help if I take offense."

She squeezed his arm kindly. "You're a funny guy. You understand things that most people don't even bother to think about. But I guess I don't have to apologize as long as you understand it so well. You're right, of course, but I'm not going to tell you why I said what I did, why I was mean. Do you know?"

"I don't know."

"What I wanted to tell you is that I've given up my trips to New York." She seemed to gasp as she said it, as though it was only at a great effort that she had got the words out.

"I've broken off with -- him. No more. I'm going in for respectability." Again that coarse laugh, which spoiled the whole effect of her revelation.

"Well," she said, looking at him inquiringly. "What have you got to say to that?"

"I can't say anything," Eric said thoughtfully. "I'm glad."

"That's enough. If you're glad, that's enough."

By this time they were walking through town. Eric glanced into the printing shop as they went by, but Albert was not to be seen, although there was a light in the front office. They walked without a word through the town, almost deserted at that hour, up the little hill past the postoffice to the congregational church, and turned left down the west arm of

the cross. Another quarter of a mile would bring them, on the other side of the railroad station, to Eileen's house.

Eric was deep in thought. It was the first time he had heard from her own lips the confession that there was a "somebody in New York", and the confession pained him. Some of the things that Albert had told him, then, were true. Her weekend trips were not as innocent as he wanted to suppose --

"I suppose you wonder," he heard her say, but she didn't finish.

And the pain that this knowledge gave him was not very greatly offset by the added information that she had given up her excursions. Although she had hurt him -- and why he was hurt he could not have said -- he felt almost at the same instant sincerely sorry for her, remembering what she had said a few moments before, about changing her mind, and realizing that she was still doubtful of her ability to make the break. Perhaps she was merely telling him this to help her take the step, in a small way to burn her bridges behind her.

"You've definitely decided?" he asked.

"What would you say if I changed my mind now?"

He couldn't answer.

"What would you think?"

"I'd be sorry."

He was afraid that she was going to laugh again, and he tried to close his ears. But she was silent.

They stopped in front of her house, which in the light of the moon looked to Eric strangely unfamiliar. There was no

light in either side of the house; the twins' next door neighbors were apparently in bed.

"I won't change my mind," she said.

She stood there holding his hand for a second and looking into his eyes with a strangely earnest look. Then she turned and walked rapidly up the steps. Just as abruptly, she turned around and came back.

"I wanted to tell you something else," she said in a whisper, her lips close to his ear. "I'm going to leave my brother. I'm going to get an apartment of my own in the block. There's a room to rent, and part of this furniture belongs to me. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know."

"We can't get along. He's too domineering. And he doesn't approve of me. We have terrible fights."

She seemed to be again about to leave, but she paused and came back to him. In a tense whisper that he never forgot, and with a look of acute fright, she said,

"I'm afraid of him."

Then she was gone, pausing at the door to wave goodnight. He walked home slowly, feeling slightly sick to his stomach, with his thoughts leaping and shifting with every beat of his heart.

XIII

Eric's first thought the next morning was of his plans for a farm. Today he would start working, providing his mother were willing. But he must go slowly; each step must be thought out beforehand, and the work must proceed methodically.

This decision to be methodical was not due to any innerent metnodicalness in Eric's nature. It sprang from the doubt in his mind concerning the strength of his desire to be a farmer. He knew from experience that he was given to impulses that sometimes lost tneir urgency with the passing of a few days, or even of a few hours; the stronger they were the sooner they expended tneir energy. And so, if he went at this business headlong while the fire of nis enthusiasm was at its height, the flame might in a few days die as other flames had died, leaving nothing but the dust and ashes of disillusionment. No, by careful planning, by quiet thought, by an unemotional step-by-step procedure he must nourish the fire, add fuel to it by the gradual accomplishment of his purpose.

For already the idea seemed less attractive than it had the day before. When he thought of telling his plans to his mother, they seemed to lose the romantic atmosphere which had cloacked them yesterday as he discussed them with Tim. When he thought of taking the first prosaic step, the poetry was

gone. He felt as one feels after a summer romance and finds that the largest part of his affection has gone with the summer sun, the summer breeze, the moonlight nights, and the gentle lapping of lakewater on the shore.

There was left, however, an earnest determination to see the thing through, not to give up without a try. Without admitting it to himself, he realized that this might well be a last-ditch stand against the threat of a wholly futile existence. Without knowing it, he was frightened by the possibility that if he did not succeed as a farmer he would find nothing else that might give his life a meaning. He only knew that he needed something real, something vital and useful to make his life meaningful; and that something, the only thing he felt capable of handling, was farming -- so attractive one moment and so lustreless the next.

He got a great uplift when, on broaching the subject to his mother, she immediately became enthusiastic. He was pleased and gratified.

"I've always wanted that," she said. "I've always wanted a farm." She kept repeating it as though thinking of something else. "That's what I've always wanted."

He knew that she was thinking of him, that it would be good for him perhaps to have something like that to occupy his time, but he knew also that the idea of a farm appealed to her.

"It'll take money," she said. "I'll give you what you need; you won't have to use your own."

He objected.

"I want you to," she argued. "I don't need it. Why should I wait until I die to give you my money. Save your own for capital, to fall back on in case of emergency. I'll be a partner -- " and then correctly interpreting the doubt in his face she added quickly, "A silent partner, of course, or better still a stockholder. You make all the decisions. You can pay me dividends if you like."

He laughed. She was humoring him as though he were still a child, but he was not offended. He felt suddenly tender toward his mother, for he knew that her sole wish was to see him happy and at peace. He kissed her, and she held him in her arms for a moment, while the tears gathered in her eyes.

"You know, Eric," his mother said, turning her head away so that he couldn't see her agitated face, "this house and the property is going to be yours when I'm gone. And it makes me happy, awfully happy, to see you taking an interest in it now. I've worried so much about it. I know your father wouldn't have approved of the way it is now, although I've done my best to keep it up. It needs a man to do these things, to see what ought to be done and to take care of it the way it should be."

She added, "I'm so happy. I must tell Myra." She started away, and then turned back with a worried look. "Oh, but my flower bed. Will you have to plow that up? Do I have to give up my flowers?"

He laughed and reassured her, and she bustled off upstairs to tell her sister.

Eric ate breakfast in the kitchen, wondering what was keeping the three women, Cleone, his aunt, and his mother, upstairs. He could hear them walking around, with occasional pauses in the sound of their footsteps as though they were talking.

Natalie, silent as usual, waited on him. She looked ill. Her face was even paler than usual and was drawn in painful lines. He could tell nothing of her thoughts from her opaque eyes. She waited on him and dried dishes at the same time. He had long since grown used to her silence, and he ate his breakfast as though she were not present. He judged by the dishes Natalie was drying that the others had eaten. Once she stood near him for some time as though she were on the verge of speaking, but she turned away without saying anything. He continued eating, making his plans for the day.

This morning he would look at the barn to see how much needed to be done to it, and then he would look over the grounds to find out which parts he should plow and which should be reserved for hay. If he had time he would look over the orchard and see how much work had to be done on it, although the pruning would have to wait until fall. Then in the afternoon -- but this afternoon he was supposed to visit Albert; he had almost forgotten.

As he was about to get up from the breakfast table, Natalie turned toward him, and he saw that she wanted to speak. He waited while she hesitated. Finally she spoke, hesitantly, her voice trembling slightly; and he noticed too that the towel in

her hand shook as though she were agitated.

"You... were at Tim Cadwell's yesterday?"

He nodded, feeling sorry for her and wondering.

"Did you see... Eileen there?"

"Yes," he said. "I did. She was there for supper." Evidently she knew of Eileen's intimacy with the Cadwells.

She hung up the towel and began to put the dishes away, but he could see that she wanted to say more.

"How is she... getting along?"

"Oh, fine, Natalie. Fine. She seems happy and... she's a very nice girl," he finished lamely.

"And Albert? You've seen him?"

"Yes.. He's fine too."

She said flatly, "He was here the other night."

He nodded, not knowing what to say. He stammered, "He... was in a hurry... he couldn't stay long."

For a time she was silent, and then she said, "You don't have to excuse him. It's my own fault. I have never been a good mother to my children. I have never been able to. I have never felt like a mother, and never shall. They know that, and they act accordingly---" Almost under her breath she continued -- "My own fault. I never could."

For some time the footsteps upstairs had ceased, and he guessed that the three women were conversing, but he could not hear their voices.

"Twenty-five years ago today," Natalie began, and she stopped at the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. Eric

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recognized them as Cleone's.

Natalie added hurriedly, "Tell them I am coming to see them." And she turned back to her work as Cleone came in. Eric met her near the door.

"Aunt Mary just told us about your plans," Cleone said, her eyes sparkling and her face alight with a smile of pleasure. "It's wonderful. It's just the thing for you. You'll make a wonderful farmer. Have you finished breakfast? Then come on into the other room." She led him into the living room. "Yes, you'll make a wonderful farmer."

"Do you think so?" He was delighted with her enthusiasm and with a candid pleasure she showed at his choice. Again the prospect of farming took on the rosy glow of yesterday and his heart was warm with anticipation.

"When do you start?" Cleone asked.

"Today," Eric said. "Don't you see?" And he pointed to the old clothes he had put on.

"Good. Then I'll spend my last day helping you get your farm started. Now I'll change my clothes." She turned to go upstairs, but stopped at the sound of his voice, as though she had been expecting it.

"Your last day," he said. "What do you mean?" Eric felt suddenly cold.

"Yes. Didn't Aunt Mary tell you? Mother decided that we should go home tomorrow. I meant to tell you yesterday; I almost did, but somehow... I didn't." She turned quickly and ran upstairs.

Eric sat down in front of the cold fireplace, aware that something serious was happening inside of him but unable to name or recognize the emotion which had swept over him. It was not the softening feeling of sadness, nor the deep, raking of grief, or at least not these alone. He felt as he had sometimes felt before when he heard a song that some time in the past under other circumstances he had heard and loved, and the hearing of the song now created a well of loneliness in his heart. Perhaps the similarity of that emotion to what he felt now was responsible for the fact that now the words and tune of a song kept running through his mind, keeping him from thinking, as though the words and the tune expressed everything that was in his heart and no thought was necessary. It was a tune which he had heard sung by a negro glee club or choir, a rhythmic, plaintive, sonorous song, and it rang in his ears and almost brought tears to his eyes. The only words he could remember were, "Please don' take away my song", but over and over that phrase sounded in his mind. "Please don' take away my song, my song, my song. Please don' take a...way.. my song. Please don' take away my song."

He tried to put the tune out of his mind and to think rationally of what Cleone had said. She had said they were going home. That was natural, wasn't it? They had been here now over a month, and it was natural that they should go now that he was home and his mother was no longer in need of company. He should have expected that.

But the truth was that he had not expected it, had never

given it a thought -- had not wanted to think of it. He had not stopped to consider that after all they had a life to live, friends to see, and a home to keep; that inevitably they must return to it. They, his aunt and cousin, had seemed as much a part of this place, his home, as his mother; they were here when he arrived, and they seemed to belong even more than he did. And later, after he had got used to being at home, he had not wanted to think of their leaving; the thought was painful, and thus never allowed to enter his mind. He liked his aunt, and he had become in a short space of time very much attached to Cleone.

But now he was faced with the unpleasant reality of their departure, and he realized that he would miss them keenly. He felt that he had grown dependent on Cleone. Her gentle voice, her clear gray eyes, and her calm, kindly face, all seemed beautiful to him now as he thought of her, and he knew there would be a void in his life when she left.

Why did she have to go? But perhaps it was better that way, he mused; he would have to learn to fight his battle alone, and it was a false strength that depended on someone else to bolster it.

"Please don't take away my song."

Cleone came down dressed in knaki riding breeches that had split their seam at the knee, and a heavy knaki shirt open at the neck.

"Mother wants to see you before we go out," she said.

"She'd come down only she's busy packing. I'll wait for you

down here."

She looked at him searchingly as he left and her face was serious, almost sad. He tried unsuccessfully to smile.

Upstairs he found his aunt sitting on the edge of her bed talking with his mother. She spoke before he had a chance to say a word.

"Eric," she said in her good-naturedly blunt manner. "I want you to plan to be with us tonight. I'm treating the whole family to dinner at the Bristol Inn. We want to spend our last night here all together. Will that be all right with you?"

"Surely," Eric answered. "I wouldn't think of being away on your last night."

"Good. That's all I wanted to say."

"I'm sorry that you're leaving, Aunt Myra. Do you really have to go?"

"Oh, Eric," she said, as though she had been over the same ground many times before, "Don't make me explain it all again. We've been here much too long already, two weeks longer than I'd planned. I've got a home, you know, and that has to be taken care of."

He could tell by her tone that she really regretted the necessity of leaving, but she seemed to think it unavoidable.

"We'll miss you," he said.

"Well, run along," she said kindly. "I'll miss you too. But we'll come up again."

"And stay longer," his mother added.

He went downstairs and with Cleone started a tour of his "farm". Eric had intended to make a careful, observant tour of inspection, starting at the barn and then going over to the orchard and from there to the fields in back of the house, his intention being to make note of the changes that had to be made and possibly even to plot out the main garden. But try as he might to interest himself in the work that lay before him he found his interest flagging, his thoughts wandering. The enthusiasm was gone like a bursted bubble. He tried in vain to concentrate.

The barn, a few yards in back of the house and a little to one side, the front of which was used to house the car, was in a bad state of repair. Certain obvious changes had to be made; the roof had to be fixed, the hayloft needed a new floor, the ground floor would have to be torn up and replaced by concrete, the stalls had to be patched -- and this and more had to be done, as was perfectly evident. But none of these things registered on Eric's mind, and the notebook which he carried in his hand remained blank.

Cleone, noticing his preoccupation, tried to shake him out of his lethargy by asking questions, and by talking brightly about the prospects of the farm. The sound of her voice cheered him; he answered her questions and tried to respond to her mood, and for a while they walked, carefree and happy, from the barn to the orchard, and then back to the flower garden, where they stood not knowing where to go next or what to say to each other.

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"Can't we go out to the hill again?" Cleone asked, referring to the walk they had taken earlier in the week. "That's the place I'll remember best. It was so pleasant there -- that's really where we first got acquainted."

Eric consented, knowing that it would be futile to continue his inspection in his present state of mind. That would have to wait.

It was the brightest and warmest day of the spring, and the sun had already dried the morning dampness of the fields. For the first time a fresh green shade was noticeable; the new grass seemed to have sprung up overnight. The sky was painfully blue; the birds were everywhere; the warm fresh scent of spring was in the air; for the first time that year the sounds and smells and colors of spring were all blended into a perfect day.

Eric felt all this with a keenness and sensitiveness which he had never known before. His senses seemed to have come alive after a long sleep; he felt that every nerve was tuned to every note that nature played -- his whole body seemed to have become a hypersensitive receptive organ with antenna stretched to every sound and sight and color in their little universe.

Eric could not account for this unusual hypersensitivity, but he revelled in it, although, as he became aware of it, it grew to be almost painful in its acuteness. It filled his mind and thoughts and drove everything else into the background.

He wondered whether Cleone was feeling the same way. She

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was walking along looking at the ground, her face a little bit flushed and very thoughtful. Absorbed as she was she noticed that he had looked at her and she looked up at him with a half smile and immediately looked down again, blushing still more. He guessed that she was thinking of how they had run and played on this same ground before -- only a few days earlier, but now seeming so far in the past.

With easy strides, unhurried but without pausing, they traversed the soft pastureland that stretched toward the hill in the distance and toward the woods beyond the hill. Every once in a while the illusion of natural wildness and simplicity was broken as the sound of an automobile horn reached Eric's ears from the village, but this was almost drowned out by the natural sounds which seemed to din in his ears.

Silently but in perfect accord they ascended the short hill, and as though by mutual consent they sat down facing the west and the woods that started at the edge of the little valley that lay below them.

As they reached the top of the little hill, Eric had the strange sensation of stepping up out of the range of all the sounds that had assailed his ears as he walked. He seemed to have reached a haven of almost unearthly quiet; there was a slight drumming in his ears; his head became suddenly clear and free, his thoughts lucid and orderly. It was the same sensation that one feels when ascending from a dive in deep water and bursting through the surface into the open air. It was as though he had turned a radio dial from the tympanic crescendo of

a mighty symphony and suddenly tuned in on the sweet single-note strain of a violin.

And that single note which his senses now recorded alone, was the bond between him and Cleone. He felt now an intangible communion with her, all the hypersensitivity that he had possessed a moment before had been transferred to a sixth sense, that was almost as tangible as a telephone wire stretched from his mind to hers. Guided by this sense they had stopped at the same instant at the top of the hill, looked for the same length of time at the view before them, breathed a sigh at the same time, sat down in unison, and at the same time began to think of the same thing.

For he knew what she was thinking just as truly as though she had spoken her thoughts, better perhaps than if she had put them into words. And he had the feeling also that she knew that their minds were at that moment in conjunction, that it was not necessary for either of them to speak.

He knew that the most prominent word in the mind of his cousin was the word cousin; and he knew that she and her mother were leaving on account of that word. Of course, the reasons they had given this morning earlier were true and good reasons, but they were not the decisive ones. He knew that his aunt had decided that it was not healthy for him or for Cleone to be living on such intimate terms when the barrier of cousin stood between them and the normal development of the attraction that each felt for the other. For his aunt, he knew, had noticed their liking for each other and had worried about it,

recognizing in it something more than the liking that should exist between cousins. He knew that Cleone was thinking about this now, and it seemed strange to him that he should know it, since he had never before given it a thought. His liking for Cleone had been immediate and whole hearted, and he had completely forgotten that she was his cousin after he had once met her.

Now that he had grown to need her she was leaving. And she knew that he needed her, was leaving because he needed her. Because such a need should not exist between cousins.

He knew that she did not want to leave. She told him that in silence. For a long time their minds dwelt on that thought, hating to leave it.

But her mind was made up. She had to leave. It was better so. And for a long time their minds locked and refused to go any further than that. Without looking at each other they could see the sadness and the gloom that the thought produced.

Then suddenly Eric felt her calm strength communicating itself to him, and her thoughts ran in his mind. You, Eric, must be strong enough to stand on your own feet. The world which you face is different from mine, and the mind with which you face it is different from mine; thus it is your own private individual battle that you must win with your own strength. If I could only help you -- but I can't; the ties of blood keep us apart, while the call of our kindred spirits try to hold us together. You must go on, alone. You must go on.....

For a long time they sat thus, silent and almost unmoving,

and Eric felt that never before had he been so completely in accord with another person, in such communion with another mind and heart. The anguish which he had felt at the first word of her coming departure still remained, but the mist of despair and perplexity had lifted; new strength flowed in his veins. Hope was mingled with the pain. He knew that he would never forget these moments with her, and that he could come back to them in thought when he needed strength and courage.

From somewhere far far off the sound of the noon whistle came to his ears. Together the cousins rose to their feet and stood side by side looking toward the west where the mountains rose above the trees. All this time they had been holding each others' hand without knowing it. As they turned toward home, she released his hand, and the spell was broken. They talked quietly, as they walked, about ordinary things, about the coming of spring and about the things he would plant in his garden next year.

In the afternoon Eric went down to see Albert, but he was not at home. He knocked twice and after waiting several minutes turned away. Thinking he heard a footstep inside the house, he knocked again. Someone in the other side of the two-family house pushed the curtain aside and looked out the window. It was a fat dirty-face boy of about twelve, who shook his head as though to signify that there was no one home.

Eric stepped over to the window and questioned him.

"Has he gone out?" he asked, but the boy couldn't hear.

He repeated the question shouting.

The boy shouted back. "He went out to the woods with a shovel."

"Just now?"

"This noon."

Eric shook his head in token that he understood, waved his hand, and left.

The Bristol Inn was a two-story wooden building which had once been painted white, a rambling, haphazard structure, in a village, twenty miles from Keton, that numbered not more than a thousand inhabitants. The Inn, however, was a landmark, lying in one of the most beautiful settings in Vermont, completely surrounded by low, rolling mountains, accessible by a single road that wound like a ribbon between the crests of the modest peaks. In the fall the village seemed to be seated in the midst of a glorious banquet of color; in the winter it huddled down in a towering sea of virginal white that was breathtakingly cold and breathtakingly beautiful; but now in the early spring it was at its worst, looking like a snabby clutch of speckled eggs in a nondescript nest of awe-inspiring dimensions but in no other way remarkable.

The Inn itself was almost deserted, except for the desk clerk, a couple of waitresses, and a few old people who looked like permanent guests, when the Tobins arrived with Aunt Myra and Cleone. Natalie had been invited but had refused.

The floor of the dining room was slanted where the lounca-

tion had sunk or expanded, and the broad boards creaked with every step. The tables, however, were neatly laid with fresh white table cloths, bright silver, and attractive china. The walls were attractively decorated with shelves of antique plates, with pictures of Vermont scenes, and with Currier and Ives prints, all of which gave the room an atmosphere of ancientness and of solid respectability.

The visitors sat at a large table which looked out on the back yard of the Inn, a spacious lawn bordered by flower beds. In the middle of the lawn was a fountain built in the form of a circular watering trough, made out of black lustrous granite. The figure in the middle of the fountain was composed of three stomachy infants standing back to back and spouting water out of their mouths.

Eric had been to Bristol and had eaten at the Inn several times before with his mother; he had seen it at its best and at its worst. But each time in the past when he had entered the little village he had been struck anew by its simplicity and its uniqueness. He always had carried away a clear and pleasurable impression of its quiet, unspectacular grandeur, an impression that lasted for months, producing a mood that would last for days. Then on his return he would receive another and different impression, just as striking, just as pleasurable, but as though the scene had been shifted and was presenting an entirely new aspect. He knew of no other place which was so nearly and so unassumingly unique, so striking and yet so variable.

And so it was this time. Although he had not been there for several years -- his last visit was with his mother on the evening before he had returned for his second and last year of college, four years ago -- still the memory of that visit was singularly fresh in his mind, and the picturesque image of the Inn, the village, and the surrounding mountains was still vivid. It had been early fall. The leaves were just beginning to turn, and though not yet presenting their full color-glory were almost as beautiful as they would ever be. The trees were still fully clad, the grass was still freshly green, and the mountains were soft and warm looking in the late afternoon sun. The whole scene suggested an almost wanton luxuriance of natural growth and a careless, abundant fertility; and yet over all this riotous display there seemed to be a studied attention to beauty, a beauty that was achieved with the least possible waste of the materials at hand, which revealed itself in a single tree, in the smallest flower bed as well as in the sweeping lines of the neighboring mountains. Such was the scene as he had last viewed it.

Today all that was changed. Although it was still early evening, the sun was no longer visible from Bristol, and the mountains wore a sombre cloak of shadows. By reason of their blackness, unrelieved by any bright color, Eric felt that the mountains had closed in on the little town, that they had moved closer since he saw them last; they looked like dark storm clouds ready to burst with rain, pressing together and about to envelop the village, and against their blackness an occasional

white birch stood like a fantastic bleached skeleton. The near trees were bare, except for the dark vestments of the evergreens; the grass was matted and dry; the flower beds around the Inn were clotted with soggy leaves, untended and ugly. As he looked around, Eric felt that here was a world apart; in spite of the desolateness of the scene, it was impressive, moving -- and he was glad that he had come.

Eric sat opposite Cleone at the table. Aunt Myra had her back to the window through which could be seen the faded lawn and the granite fountain in the middle. And his mother sat with her back to the main part of the dining room.

Aunt Myra seemed to be determined to make the occasion a pleasant one and a festive one, and without her efforts, her sprightly talk, her pleasant and boisterous laughter, and her complete assumption of responsibility, it might well have been a funereal party. Cleone and Eric were both preoccupied, although the faces of neither showed any signs of sadness. Mrs. Tobin was unusually quiet.

All of them, however, soon began to come under the influence of Aunt Myra's gay mood. Her laugh was infectious, and though she was not by any means a witty woman, her remarks were often very comical by reason of her outspoken bluntness and her ability to see the grotesque in the commonest of situations. Tonight she was at her best, and soon the others were laughing with her, talking, and thoroughly enjoying themselves.

The waitress, a thin, plain-looking girl, young and inexperienced, seemed somewhat frightened at serving such a

merry party, and while she was taking the order became almost terrified at the imperious attitude of Aunt Myra. She got confused, and the result was that she took down the order wrong, and brought in the wrong dishes at the first serving. Eric, who had ordered bouillon, was given chicken soup; and his mother, who had ordered chicken soup, was given a glass of tomato juice. Aunt Myra brusquely ordered the blushing girl to bring in the correct orders, in spite of Eric's protestations that he was perfectly satisfied with what he had. He was pained by the girl's evident embarrassment -- she seemed almost ready to cry, but bravely went on with her work, making the corrections without a word -- and in his mind he rebuked his aunt for her lack of sensibility, for failing to see that she was causing the girl more pain than the filling of their own petty orders was worth.

There were three other diners in the room, a very old and feeble couple on the opposite side from where they were sitting, and a single middle-aged man sitting near the entrance door. All three of them were attracted by the noise, the chief cause of which was Aunt Myra's laugh and unabashed voice, and they cast frequent glances toward that side of the room.

Aunt Myra seemed unaware that there was anyone else in the room; she was completely unselfconscious -- and the dinner party continued pleasantly, and at times hilariously.

"No," said Eric. "I can't remember. It's gone from me completely. It was something I liked -- I remember Mrs. Cadwell said 'I have something you like' -- but I can't remember what

it was."

"Baked beans?" Cleone suggested.

"Now how did you know I liked baked beans?" he asked wonderingly. "No it wasn't that."

"Oh, well, think now," Aunt Myra said brusquely. "I want to know. Your mother says she's one of the best cooks in town, and I want to know what the best cooks in town serve to their guests. What kind of potatoes did she have."

"Well, not the ordinary kind. Something like scalloped potatoes, only creamier and better."

"Sliced, diced, or mashed?"

"Diced, I think," said Eric, who had no idea what "diced" meant..

"Well, and what kind of meat?"

His mother laughed. "He doesn't know one kind of meat from another."

"It wasn't chicken," Eric said, joining in their laugh at his own expense.

"There was a special kind of salad," he said brightening with recollection. "Lettuce at the bottom, and all kinds of fruit mixed into a ball of jello, sprinkled with nuts. It was very good."

"Remarkable," said Aunt Myra. "Vegetables?"

"Yes. Lots of them."

"What kind? What kind? I know she had vegetables, but what kind? And how were they cooked?"

Cleone chided her mother. "He went there to eat, Mother,

not to criticize. Tell her to do her own research, Eric."

"There's just one more thing I want to know -- What did you have for dessert, if any? Or is that 'gone from you' too?"

"Oh yes, I remember that. That's what she meant when she said she had something I liked. It was lemon meringue pie." He breathed a sigh of relief at having remembered something distinctly.

"Well that's something. What a memory. Just like a man though -- here, that's for Cleone," she said, speaking to the young waitress, who was trying to serve the main course, and the waitress put the plate down in front of Mrs. Tobin -- "No no. Cleone, I said. This one over here. You know, Mary, I'd hate to live in a place like this, this town, I mean; I'd have to keep craning my neck upward to look at the mountains all the time. I should -- that's for me, and that's his -- I should think the people around here would get creaks in their necks. Do you want coffee now or later? -- Two now, two later. -- Anybody want milk? No? -- No milk."

The waitress hurried away.

"Was there anyone else there?" Eric's mother asked, still thinking of the Cadwells.

Eric hesitated. For some reason he felt guilty about revealing Eileen's presence at the Cadwells, and he reproached himself for the feeling. He was afraid of what Aunt Myra might say, afraid that she might say something unkind and then he would have to defend Eileen; and afraid also of what Cleone would think, who was looking at him now with a question in her

eyes. He felt his face grow hot.

"Yes," he said. Eileen Comfort."

"Humph," said Aunt Myra. "Nice company you keep."

Eric studied his plate, unwilling to meet his cousin's eyes.

"What's she like?" Aunt Myra asked.

"She's -- "

"Well, never mind. I don't want to know. I have a pretty good idea anyway. Cleone, pass the salt -- right there at your elbow. Sex and clothes; I know the type. What was she doing at a respectable place like the Cadwell's? And the butter, please, Cleone."

"I -- "

Mrs. Tobin interrupted him in a gentle voice. "You're really quite wrong, Myra. She's a very respectable looking girl. Exceptionally pretty, too, in her way. She has black hair, jet -- she's just the opposite type from Cleone -- "

"Well, I should hope so!"

"I mean in looks... in coloring; a brunette with very fair, white skin and black black eyes. Really striking. And a beautiful figure. She's really not as bad as people around town paint her, I don't think."

"She was one of the first things I heard about when I came to Keton. The woman in the bakery shop certainly doesn't think much of her; and that man in the grocery store, Ayres, hinted all sorts of things."

"Lew Ayres gossips like an old woman anyway."

"Of course, I've never seen her."

Cleone broke in. "Well I have. And I'd believe anything they said about her."

Eric felt that she was speaking directly to him, and he was surprised and hurt by the spite in her voice.

Aunt Myra asked, "When did you see her?"

"Why I told you. At the Mattison's, when Eric and I went down the night before the funeral."

"You didn't tell me."

"But, Mother -- "

"All right, maybe you did. But I don't remember it."

Eric hoped that the little altercation would change the subject, but his mother persisted.

"Even so, she shouldn't be blamed too much; it's not entirely her fault. She's never had a mother's care... she's never known what that means... a mother's love and direction. How can it be her fault?"

"Well, you admit then that she's probably bad."

"I don't know."

"What difference does it make?" Cleone said. "Why should we bother talking about her when none of us really know her? The only real connection is that her mother works for Aunt Mary. None of us can say that we really know her."

"Yes we can," Eric broke out, hardly knowing what he was going to say. "I at least can. I know her well. And I do not believe that she's bad. Underneath... in her heart.... I believe that she's as good as anyone here." He knew that he

had shocked them, but he continued recklessly, looking steadfastly at his plate. "What Mother says is right. --- She can't be blamed. She may have... done wrong, but she's not really bad at heart. She's good. She's very good. She's one of the best people I know."

He never knew why he had said what he did, and he was abashed and ashamed when he finished. For what seemed to Eric a long time no one said anything, and then Aunt Myra broke the strained silence..

"Well, all right. That settles it. Let's drop it. I'm against gossip anyway."

They went on eating in silence. Eric lifted his eyes to Cleone, but she wouldn't look at him.

Now I've spoiled it, he thought. Everything was so perfect between us, just as I should like it to be on the last day, since she has to go away. But why was she so spiteful -- because I broke my promise not to see her -- then -- again; why she knew that I'd broken it before, not through my own fault, of course, but neither was this. She thinks that Eileen isn't good for me; and she thinks perhaps that I'm in love with Eileen. But I'm not; I pity her. I shouldn't have said that; I shouldn't have defended her. After all..."

"As I was saying," Aunt Myra said, looking around the table and at the other people in the room as though challenging anyone to contradict her, "the natives around here must have cricks in their necks from looking at those hills, although I don't see what there is to look at; you just can't help

looking up though."

"They're beautiful in the fall, Myra; aren't they, Eric? Gorgeous coloring. You can't imagine. And then it's so calm and peaceful here, even quieter than Keton...." She went on in a low voice talking between mouthfuls of food.

Eric ate in silence. She's beginning to hate me now, he said to himself, thinking of his cousin, whose face was expressionless and whose eyes never met his. If I could only talk to her. It's such a wretched misunderstanding. We shouldn't quarrel; we should understand each other because we're so much alike. I think she's wrong to dislike Eileen; I could explain it to her so easily.. I won't let her go away without an understanding, a reconciliation. Everything was so nice until a few minutes ago.

"Yes," he said, answering a question from his mother though he had not heard the words.

Her face looks pale, as though she were terribly angry. Perhaps she won't let me speak to her, and then go away tomorrow morning without an understanding. But I'll never forget this afternoon; I really believe she knew my every thought then, and I knew hers. How strange it was. Moments like those...

He became aware that his aunt was looking at him sharply, and he guessed that she had been speaking to him.

"What did you say?" he asked, coloring.

Aunt Myra burst out laughing, and Eric smiled sheepishly.

"I didn't say anything, but while we're on the subject, have you decided what to call your farm? It's got to have a

name, you know, like Pleasant View or Orchard Hills or something like that."

"I... never gave it a thought. I've hardly had time to think about all the details yet; there are so many things to do before I can even get it started."

"You must have got it pretty well planned out this afternoon."

He blushed still more and saw the color mounting into Cleone's cheeks. He did not dare look at his aunt.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, we did a lot. Cleone helped me. I owe Cleone a lot." Thus awkwardly he tried to mend the breach, but still he saw no signs of relenting.

"Well, you can call your first cow "Cleone".

"Mother!"

He couldn't help himself. He laughed nervously, controlled himself, and then laughed again. Foolishly he tried to stop by drinking some water, and choked on it, still laughing. The tears came to his eyes, and he covered his face with his handkerchief, but not before he caught Cleone's look of anger, the mounting flush in her cheeks, and the stormy contraction of her brows. The clutch of fear at his heart as he remembered his first night at home and his hysterical breakdown sobered him and left him pale and thoughtful.

"I've taken a lease on my flower bed," his mother was saying. "Not a bulb, not a flower, shall be touched; my little plot shall be sacred to beauty."

"But how about a name, can't anyone think of a name?"

"How about Sunset Hill Farm?" his mother suggested.

"Or Comfort Corner," Cleone suggested.

She was stabbing at him again, but he felt no resentment, merely sorrow that such a thing should be.

"Do you think Natalie wanted to come tonight?" Aunt Myra asked, forgetting her concern about a name for the farm.

"No," Mrs. Tobin said, "She never has gone out with us. She very seldom goes out at all."

"I thought she looked a little undecided when I asked her."

"Maybe. It's hard to tell. She hasn't been herself the last few days. I don't think she's well." His mother turned to him. "What do you think, Eric -- does she seem the same to you?"

"I noticed this morning that she looked pale ---"

"She's always pale," Aunt Myra said.

"No, but sick," Eric said.

"That's right; I'm a little bit worried about her," his mother said. "If she were sick, she wouldn't say a word. She never complains. Poor Natalie."

"Bosh, 'Poor Natalie'! If anyone's to blame for her children's faults, she's the one. I can't imagine a mother -- well, let's not talk about it. But that woman provokes me."

"She's been like that for over twenty years," Mrs. Tobin said. "Without a single change. But you should have seen her before her husband died, before the children were born. A perfect beauty. Eileen is her image. It gave me a shock the other day when I met Eileen on the street. The sight of her

took me back to my youth, when I knew Natalie as she was then. The most amazing resemblance."

"What changed her so," Cleone asked curiously.

Mrs. Tobin sighed. "I don't know. It doesn't seem possible. She came to me two years after her husband died and asked for part-time work, and she was changed then. I didn't recognize her. But when I knew who she was I tried to help her; she wouldn't take anything except a job. And she's worked for me ever since. When the children were young, she left them with a Mrs. Peers -- she's dead now -- and when they were twelve Natalie came to live with me; they've been on their own ever since, except that she supported them."

"She's a strange case," Aunt Myra said. "Her husband was killed in the war?"

Mrs. Tobin nodded.

"Do you think that was it -- the death of her husband?" Cleone asked.

"Other people have stood it," Aunt Myra said sternly.

There was a constrained silence while the waitress awkwardly removed the plates. As she picked up Aunt Myra's plate and started to remove it, the knife fell with a clang into the bread plate. The girl crimsoned and excused herself, picking the knife up with nervous fingers.

"Menus," said Aunt Myra. "Thanks, Now what'll we have for dessert? How is that coconut cream pie?"

"One?" said the embarrassed waitress.

"No. I said how is it?"

"Oh.. I thought....It's all right. I mean it's very good."

"Fresh?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"All right. I'll have that. Mary?"

"Ice cream -- vanilla with chocolate sauce."

Cleone ordered apple pie, and Eric, unable to make a decision, asked for the same. He felt sorry for the evidently confused waitress.

The young girl hurried off, but half way across the dining room she stopped and hesitantly started to return. As she slowly approached the table with her face burning and her lips trembling, Aunt Myra called out, "Well, what is it now?"

The old couple on the other side of the room were whispering together and watching curiously. The man near the door raised his head at the sound of Aunt Myra's voice, and then looked down quickly..

"Was it vanilla ice cream?" the girl asked helplessly.

Mrs. Tobin said kindly, "Yes, child, vanilla with chocolate sauce."

"And coffee for two," Aunt Myra called after the retreating back, for the girl had turned quickly to hide her desperate tears.

Eric writhed in acute discomfort. He couldn't see how his aunt could fail to notice the girl's embarrassment, but evidently she was blissfully unaware that she was causing anyone pain. Aunt Myra's heart, he knew, was soft enough if it were once reached, but she was one of those persons whose

sympathies lie below the surface, who are serenely unsensitive to the feelings of others. Eric could not blame her, for he knew that she had a heart of gold; but he was keenly sorry for the girl.

As she returned, he watched her with fear in his heart from the moment she entered the dining room until she reached the table with her tray laden with desserts and coffee. But then afraid that he might confuse her still more, he ceased to look at her, and yet, with his nerves on edge he seemed to feel her every movement as she took the dishes from the tray and put them on the table. He knew without looking when she lifted one of the desserts from the tray, and when she had served everyone with dessert, he knew without looking when she picked up the coffee and set it beside Cleone's plate.

And then what he had feared would happen actually occurred. The trembling girl picked up his cup of coffee from the tray, and as she tried to reach around him to put it beside his plate she inadvertently brushed against his shoulder with the hand that held the cup. The cup slid precariously on the saucer and almost fell off, but not quite; half of the steaming coffee, however, spilled out onto his right leg.

There was a stifled scream from the girl, and Aunt Myra, who had just put a forkful of pie into her mouth, looked up.

"It's nothing," Eric said. "It didn't touch me. It went on the floor. Don't bother with it." By a great effort of will he had not moved a muscle.

Aunt Myra continued eating her pie, and the girl retreated,

looking doubtfully at Eric.

"This is good pie," Aunt Myra said.

"I haven't enjoyed a meal so much in years," Mrs. Tobin signed.

He saw that Cleone was looking at him in wonderment. He looked into her eyes and saw sympathy and understanding there, and she smiled at him in a peculiar way. In a moment he was completely happy.

On the way home Eric drove, with Cleone in the front seat near him. His mother and his aunt conversed in low tones in back. In his heart was a strange mixture of happiness and sadness; happiness at their reconciliation -- for a single glance had told him that they were once again in accord -- and sadness at the thought of tomorrow. Cleone's eyes were shining, and she looked at him often as he drove. Neither said anything significant to the other all the way home; nothing needed to be said.

XIV

It was true that Albert Comfort had gone out to the woods with a shovel. He had left his house at about two o'clock, completely forgetting that at three Eric Tobin was coming to visit him. Had he remembered it, he probably would have waited for his friend, postponing his trip to the woods another day -- for he was pretty well decided what the result would be, what he would find in the woods.

This was not the first time; the day before, he had made a similar trip, without the shovel, and the result had been very satisfying. He had set out in a rather gloomy mood, cursing his stupidity, but eager and expectant. He had returned smug and in the best of spirits.

On the day of Eric's visit, Albert set out with a short-handled, pointed shovel on his shoulder, dressed in old clothes, with a pair of workman's gloves on his hands. Whistling merrily but in a subdued, thoughtful tone, he picked his way through the woods and pastureland in back of his house, doing his best, once he had started, to avoid being seen.

He travelled by a very indirect route. His destination was due south, but in order to avoid the town he had to walk almost two miles directly west before he could find a bridge that crossed the Keton River; but he chose to do this because the bridge was on a lonely road where no one would be likely

to see him.

On his way he had to cross several dirt roads, and he crossed them with great circumspection, choosing the protection of bushes and trees as he approached the road, and then after looking for some time in both directions to see that no one was approaching he dashed across the road into the protective foliage on the other side. But the roads were deserted.

He avoided houses as best he could, but sometimes he was forced to cross a cleared space within sight of a house. Then he would slacken his pace and walk along in a leisurely manner, holding the shovel point down close to his side, so as not to attract attention. He was quite confident that no one saw him, and even if anyone did, his care to keep a safe distance between himself and any habitation insured him against recognition.

Thus he walked for more than an hour, while an amusing and ingenious plan formed in his mind.

In spite of his precautions, however, he came within an ace of being detected. He had crossed the last road and passed the last farmhouse between him and his destination, and he walked along briskly, choosing the edge of an open field where the walking was easier instead of dodging in and out among the trees of the thickly wooded section on his right. Preoccupied with the plan that had occurred to him a few moments before, he failed to see the figures of two boys approaching at a rapid pace. They were almost a mile away, but he knew that they could see him if they happened to look

that way, and perhaps even recognize him.

Cursing, he plunged into the woods, and lay on his stomach behind a tree, watching them breathlessly to see if they had noticed him.

When he first noticed them, they were on top of a small hill on the other side of the field, walking one in front of the other, the bigger boy leading. They were too far away for him to recognize them, although the larger one looked familiar. Beyond them, and to his right, almost three miles distant from the place where he was hiding, he could see the roof of the Tobin house and of the barn next to it. Again he swore under his breath, realizing that anyone with a spyglass could easily see him and know him from the Tobins.

As the boys veered sharply to their left toward him, he thought that he had been discovered, and prepared to dash farther into the woods. But they were merely taking advantage of the steep slope of the hill on that side and running down it at break-neck speed. At the bottom they slackened their pace and walked along side-by-side in their original direction.

Now, as they passed abreast of him, Albert recognized the bigger boy as Matthew Ashley, the postman's son; the other one he did not know. Albert waited until they were safely out of sight, and then continued on his way, this time sticking carefully to the woods.

Gradually he made his way deeper and deeper into the woods until he was travelling almost directly west, at right angles to his original direction, and now in a direct line with

the Tobin house. As he walked, with the shovel over his shoulder, he looked carefully for footprints or any other human sign, but the rain of the day before had washed away any traces that might have been there, except the occasional prints of his own feet, which he had left in passing that way yesterday afternoon. Even these, however, were barely visible and only at very rare intervals where he had inadvertently stepped on a soft spot of ground not covered by the heavy coating of leaves that carpeted most of the woodland.

Finally he broke through a particularly heavily wooded section that was made up mostly of closely grown evergreen trees, hemlock and pine, and stopped with a sigh of relief on the edge of a small cleared space, wiping the cobwebs and the dirty sweat from his face. Before him was a small, tumble-down cabin, perforated by chinks so wide that he could look right through it and see that it was empty. Its roof was almost non-existent except for the slender sapling poles that served as its framework. The cabin, however, was very well sheltered, in spite of its run-down condition, by the four big spruces that formed a little square and which served as a sort of bulwark, although the cabin was in no way attached to them.

As a precautionary measure Albert looked in at the open space which served as a doorway. The cabin was just as he had left it the day before; it was strewn with empty tin cans, mostly bean and evaporated milk. There were no other signs of human habitation except a can opener, rusty and bent

out of shape, which lay on the floor in one corner.

Albert stood for a moment outside the cabin and looked around to get his bearings. Then he walked briskly on a direct line through the trees, using his snovel to push aside branches and bushes, until he came to another but much smaller space among the trees. Here again he stopped to rest; his face was pale, either from his exertions or for some other reason, and the perspiration had dried. He leaned against his shovel for support..

Yesterday it had not been so easy. Not admitting to himself exactly what he was looking for and not knowing for sure that he would find anything, he had conducted a systematic search which had lasted for fully two hours and which consisted of walking round and round in gradually widening circles, using the cabin as a center, and examining every foot of ground that he traversed. He had almost given up in despair, when after completing a circle with a radius of about a hundred yards and starting another which he was determined would have to be the last, he came to the little spot in which he was now standing, and noticed with a shock of suspicion a few crumbs of freshly turned dirt. Then he had gone over every inch of the space on his hands and knees, scraping and brushing the leaves that lay on the surface, and found other pieces of dirt, found barely visible footprints in the ground under the leaves, found in the middle of the space several flat rocks cleverly concealed by leaves and forming a sort of cover over a large hole that had been filled in. Over the top of the rocks sod and leaves

had been so cleverly placed that no bulge was visible. With darkness approaching, he had been unable to do any more that day except to redistribute the sod and leaves. Satisfied with his day's work, and making quite certain that he would be able to find the place again, he went home.

Now as he stood in the same space, leaning on his shovel, he knew exactly what lay ahead of him, and for the first time he began to dislike the job which he had chosen to do. For a while he debated whether he should go through with it, whether, after all, it was necessary to go through with it, since he was so morally certain of what he would find. But this indecision did not last long; he had to make sure -- it was quite possible that he was entirely wrong, and he did not want to make a mistake. A thin smile of amusement crossed his face as he thought of the plan which he had formed and which he would carry out, if he had time this afternoon, if not, then tomorrow or the next day.

The smile left his face as he stepped to the middle of the space and began to shove the leaves away with his foot. Soon several flat rocks were revealed, which he picked up and threw to one side. Getting into the spirit of his work, he began to dig with a will, shoveling the dirt up into a large pile on his right. Once his shovel clanged against metal, and stooping and scraping with his hands he uncovered a battered frying pan, which he tossed to one side. A little later an old shoe came up on a shovel full of dirt. Examining it he found that the sole was completely worn through, the top was

badly torn, and the heel was missing. Soon after, he found its mate, in the same worn out condition.

More and more frequently now, Albert rested from his labors. As the hole deepened and widened and lengthened, he began to feel an unpleasant sensation in the pit of his stomach; and in spite of the hard work he was doing he felt cold, and the only perspiration on his body was a thin film of moisture on his forehead and a cold thin streak of sweat down his back. Once, as his thoughts ran ahead of his work, he gagged; for a moment he tried to control himself, and then giving up, he clambered up out of the hole and stumbling blindly to the edge of the cleared space he leaned against a tree and vomited. For some time he rested his head against the tree, waiting for more, and several times again he gagged without result.

Returning to his work, he stood for a long time on the edge of the excavation, too weak to begin, his face as pale as death but his eyes burning with rage at himself and disgust for his weakness.

The work went slowly after that, partly because his muscles refused to do their work and partly because he was digging more carefully now, gingerly, experimentally feeling around with his shovel before pushing it into the dirt. The hole had evidently reached its maximum width and was now almost five feet long and in one spot about two feet deep.

In this spot he uncovered a piece of cloth, which he recognized as part of a dark coat. He pushed the dirt away from it with his hands, and taking hold of it tried to pull on

it, not expecting it to give. But the coat came away easily in his hand. He stepped back in horror, for before him lay the battered, ugly face of Johnny Kinney.

As much as he had expected to see just what he saw and as much as he had steeled himself in preparation for the sight, the suddenness of the revelation and the stark reality of the dead face horrified him. For the space of a few seconds he stood there transfixed staring down at the face. And a little piece of dirt rolled down from the side of the grave and lodged in the cavity of one of the dead man's eyes.

Coming to himself, Albert quickly replaced the coat over the dead face, and then leaped out of the grave as though he had suddenly found himself standing on a hot stove. He walked rapidly and a little wildly round and round the grave, not knowing what to do next, for in his hurry he had left the shovel lying flat in the hole and he could not bring himself to retrieve it.

Finally, though, he stopped and forced himself to pick up the shovel by kneeling beside the excavation and leaning over. This done, he began rapidly to fill in the grave, shovelling like a madman.

Darkness was nearly upon him when he finished the job. He had replaced the dirt, the stones, the sod and the leaves, and had arranged the surface of the cleared spot so that as few traces as possible remained of the work that had been done and of the secret resting place of the unfortunate Johnny.

After a final survey of the spot, he placed his shovel on

his shoulder and plunged through the woods as fast as he could back the way he had come to the wide field in back of the Tobin house where he had seen the boys. Then he made his way home, just as cautiously as he had come, although he had little fear that anyone would be able to see him in the gathering gloom of the evening.

When he reached home, he felt somewhat relieved to find that Fileen had not yet come in; he guessed that she was eating in town, as she often did. Putting the shovel away in the shed in back of his house, he went about preparing his own supper, for the long walk home had given him an opportunity to collect his thoughts and regain his spirits, and with the return of stability he felt violently hungry.

As he was eating, he suddenly remembered Eric's promised visit, and getting up he went immediately to the telephone. His mother answered and told him that Eric had gone out to dinner with his family. He knew that his mother recognized his voice, and for a second he stood silent, undecided whether or not to say more; she seemed to be waiting for him to speak. But he could find nothing to say, and so he thanked her as though she were a stranger, said goodbye, and hung up.

He stood silent for several minutes with his hand on the telephone, and a strained, set, uncertain look on his face. Then he turned away wearily and went back to his supper. His face brightened as he thought of his plan. He would go through with it tomorrow -- No! For certain reasons it would have to be Monday. Tomorrow perhaps his friend Eric would come down

to see him.

XV

With a restless, nervous energy that seemed tireless Eileen had spent the morning cleaning and dusting the downstairs part of the house. She did not touch the upstairs rooms, except for making the bed in her own bedroom, because her brother was sleeping. She had heard him come in at six, and after opening her door to see if she was in he had gone immediately to bed. She had herself got up soon afterward, being unable to sleep and unwilling to lie in bed sleepless.

After breakfast she set immediately to work, washing the dirty dishes that had been accumulating for days, then sweeping and scrubbing the kitchen floor and even washing the windows. She worked rapidly but with efficiency born of long practice, although in truth she had done very little housework for the past few months, and it had been almost a year since she had done as thorough a job as she was doing this morning.

All during the morning Eileen seemed to be in the best of spirits. She wore a drab housedress, ill-fitting and wrinkled, that was probably a remnant of her mother's wardrobe, and with a large white kerchief bound around her head to hold back her hair she looked very far from striking and in fact gave an appearance of plainness and commonness that seemed, strangely enough, even more natural and native to her than did

ner usual appearance. But she seemed to be wholly unmindful of her nondescript appearance, and as she worked she hummed happily to herself, while her thoughts turned inward.

If anyone had asked her that afternoon what her thoughts were this morning, she would not have been able to say; but if anyone had asked her, "were you happy?", the answer would have been an instantaneous yes. For her thoughts were so closely interwoven with her mood that they seemed actually a part of it, and they left no record in passing. They were impressions rather than thoughts, happy impressions and hopeful ones. As soon as she had wakened in the morning she had felt a flood of happiness that was as inexplicable as a spring shower; and she did not try to explain it -- she accepted it on faith, with no misgivings, feeling that somehow, for some reason, she had a right to be happy, not asking or wondering whence that right came. She was like a child who on one day received a present which he loves and who wakes up the next morning with a heart full of joy even before he remembers the present of yesterday. Only she had received no present -- all that she had was the joy.

All through the morning this impression remained, unquestioned, and she basked in its influence while she worked. Her work seemed to speed by under her hands; nothing tired her; nothing dulled her spirits.

From the kitchen she went to the living room and washed the windows, vacuum-cleaned the rug, dry-mopped the floor, dusted and polished the furniture. And she finished her work

just as the bell in the Congregational church tolled out the hour of twelve.

As she heard the church bell she sank down in the chair which she had just finished polishing, and she began to chuckle. Her chuckle rose to a laugh, and in a moment she was shaking with gales of laughter, merry, highpitched, and slightly hysterical. For three or four minutes she sat there laughing to herself, uncontrollably, forgetful of everything. And then just as suddenly she stopped -- she had heard her brother moving in his room above.

She sat quietly, listening to him; she heard him walking in his bare feet, and then she heard his slippers clumping on the floor as he left his room, went out into the hall, stood still for a moment, and then slowly descended the stairs.

He stood in the doorway looking at her in amazement, his face puffed and bleary with sleep and his hair flying in all directions; then no less surprised he looked around at the tidiness of the room.

Suspiciously he asked, "Who was here?" His voice was hoarse and cracked with sleepiness.

Eileen said, "No one."

"What were you laughing at?"

"I was happy."

"Hell," he said disbelievingly. He sank down in an easy chair, and pulling his bathrobe close around him tried to sink back into the comfort which he had just left.

"I was happy," Eileen repeated, more to herself than to

him, and I've been working all morning. Then I realized that it was Sunday, a day of rest, and at the same time I saw myself in the mirror, and I had to laugh."

"That's enough to make anybody laugh," Albert said, closing his eyes. "You look a mess. You look like a washerwoman."

"You're not very pretty yourself." She got up and tossed the polishing rag into his lap. "Here, take that out to the kitchen when you go."

"Here, wait a minute. Where you going?" he said, fully awake again. "Wait a minute; I want to talk to you."

She didn't wait. "I'm going to take a bath and get dressed. You can talk to me later."

"Eileen, come here. Listen. What's the hurry?"

"Go eat your breakfast," she called from the stairs.

"Well, then, go to hell." He sank back in his chair, his face dark with anger. He ran his hand through his hair, irritably trying to straighten out the tangled mat, and feeling somewhat ridiculous to be angry when he looked and felt so wretchedly sleepy.

Finally he got up and went out to the kitchen, where he washed his face and combed his hair. His toothbrush was upstairs, so he would have to let that go until after breakfast. Then he set about frying himself some eggs and making coffee.

He did not know what to make of his sister's sudden industry and of her strangely joyous mood. He had wanted to talk to her about what she had told him a few days before, her decision to move; but he was glad now that she had not

stayed when he called, for he saw that something was in her mind of which he was unaware and that he would have to choose his time and his arguments carefully if he wanted to persuade her to remain with him. He decided not to broach the subject until later, perhaps after Eric had gone -- for he felt quite certain that Eric would come some time during the afternoon.

Later in the afternoon Albert and Eileen were sitting in the living room. Both were now carefully dressed, and both were, for some time, silent. Eileen was still happy and still restless, and now she seemed also rather apprehensive, afraid of what her brother might say. She was unable to sit still, but kept getting up and walking from one place to another in the room, straightening furniture that did not need straightening, looking in the heavy gilt-framed mirror over the mantelpiece, opening and closing books without looking at the pages. Albert sat by the window, moodily smoking a cigarette and watching his sister without appearing to be watching her.

He spoke at last in a low, conversational tone.

"I know who killed the Mattison girl," he said.

Eileen, standing in front of the mirror and looking into her own eyes, did not seem impressed.

"So do I," she answered carelessly.

"Who?"

"Johnny Kinney."

He laughed. "No. He didn't."

Eileen looked at him. She suspected him of joking and

felt angered at his bantering way of treating the subject.

She picked up a book from the mantelpiece and sat down, turning over the pages, determined not to let him get under her skin.

"Suppose I told you," he said, "that Johnny Kinney is dead."

"I'd say that's where he ought to be."

"And suppose I told you that somebody killed him."

She was curious in spite of herself. "Well?" she said.

"Well, somebody did."

"I don't believe it."

"You don't have to believe it," Albert said calmly. "I happen to know it for a fact. He's dead and he's buried, and he was killed."

Eileen saw that her brother was not joking. Perplexed, she waited for him to say more.

"Well, what do you think of that?" Albert asked.

"Maybe Tom Mattison killed him. He would if he could get his hands on him."

Albert said thoughtfully, "That's possible."

"Or maybe --," but she did not finish.

Albert finished for her, "Or maybe his big brother, Lawyer Burton, went out and polished him off so that he wouldn't get into any more trouble. Of course that's possible too."

"I don't believe they're brothers," Eileen said.

"You know they are," Albert said, looking at her with a sneer.

She said nothing.

"That's all possible," Albert said, "and I may be all

wrong. I've been going on the theory all along, though, that Johnny Kinney didn't do it."

In spite of the calmness of his voice, and of the conversational pitch at which he kept his tones, Eileen could feel an underlying hostility in her brother's manner, as though something rankled in his soul and he wanted to say something far different from what he was saying. He had probably chosen purposely to talk about Mary Mattison and Johnny Kinney, because that subject, being so sensational, would be least likely to cause either of them any irritation, would be least likely to allow their personalities to clash; but it did no good, for into Albert's voice already a note of irritation had crept, and she herself could feel the clash of her own ego against his.

It had always been thus; they had always quarreled. In spite of all that either could do, and they both consciously tried to be fair and to be tolerant of each other, still a word might set them bristling, and every word from then on would be like the squeak of chalk on blackboard, until they were ready to fly at each other's throat. They seldom talked alone together for ten minutes at a time without this same result; and Eileen knew that this time, too, would be the same.

The effects of these outbursts of temper might last for days or only for hours, but usually there would be a reconciliation, wordless, perhaps, but complete. Except of late: they had quarreled often in the last year, and the reconciliation was omitted. They could hardly meet, lately, without a clash; and the breach was seldom mended now but seemed to grow wider

and wider.

Eileen knew that in spite of Albert's apparent control of himself and in spite of the fact that he had chosen a "safe" subject, sooner or later his animosity, their mutual hostility, would break through the surface. And when it came so soon -- she knew it by the sound of his voice more than by his words -- she realized that today it was closer to the surface than usual. "You know they are," he had said, and she had felt her blood leap. But she had controlled the words that sprang to her lips, and Albert, aware of the danger, had switched the subject.

"I'm sure, positively sure, that Johnny didn't do it," Albert repeated. He kept stroking the top of his forehead with the flat of his hand, as though to smooth out the wrinkles in his brow. This was a habit he had acquired when he was much younger and was trying to train his hair into a pompadour by pushing at the roots of it with the palm of his hand. Eileen had warned him that he would get bald if he persisted in the habit; and actually now the hair seemed to be receding, making his forehead higher. She recognized the gesture now as a sign of nervousness.

Eileen said, "Who did then?"

"That doesn't make any difference," he said.

She took him to mean that it was not important for her to know.

"Here's the way it works," Albert said. "If Johnny were going to do a thing like that, if he were inclined that way,

he would have done it long ago. "What would have stopped him? - He didn't have any control over his passions, and so the answer is that he didn't have this particular passion."

Eileen saw that he was becoming interested in his subject and was forgetting the rankling thoughts that might lead to an outburst. She was glad, and she tried to spur him on by showing interest in what he was saying.

"The one who did it," he went on, "was someone who had fought against a tendency to such a crime and who finally lost the fight. He would be a man normal in every respect except that one."

She waited for him to go on.

"It wasn't planned, of course. It just happened, and he couldn't help himself, couldn't control himself. There was the little girl, and----"

She interrupted beseechingly, "Don't, Albert -- Please." She was shivering nervously.

"There are men like that, you know," Albert said, looking at her keenly, and pressing his hand hard against his forehead.

"Like what?"

"Children attract them sexually."

"I know, I know. I've heard -- I've read about them."

"Normal in every other way."

"Yes, I know." She could not stop shivering.

Albert asked, "Do you know any?"

She shook her head.

"Well, I know one. I've known him for a long time."

"Who?" she whispered.

"Never mind. But he killed Mary Mattison."

"But she wasn't --" she did not know how to say it.

"Violated? No, she wasn't. Maybe he was too frightened. Maybe she screamed, and he hit her on the head -- with a rock or something -- or threw her down against a tree or a stone."

She covered her face with her hands, thinking of Mary, and her elbows moved with the trembling of her body. "It's awful. Stop talking about it. You make me feel sick."

He watched her emotion and seemed to be enjoying it. With shame Eileen felt his eyes upon her; she was on the point of shrieking at him.

"Well, forget it," he said. "The big point is that everybody thought it was Johnny, and it wasn't Johnny at all. Johnny knew nothing about it; he wouldn't hurt a hair on anyone's head."

Eileen controlled herself, forced her hands down into her lap, and tried to be calm. She found it easier because at that moment she felt that nothing in the world was so hateful to her as her brother. And she did not know why. Perhaps she hated him for his overbearing manner, or for his coldness, his feelingless attitude, or perhaps for shaking her so, for disturbing the peace and happiness that she had been feeling a few moments before -- or for some other vague reason which she could not trace. He was repulsive to her. She hated and despised him at that moment.

She sat there, hardly hearing what he said. She kept

looking out the window, watching the road.

"But anyway," Eric continued, "this somebody did it, in a moment of weakness when he couldn't help himself, and fortunately nobody suspected him because they were all too busy suspecting Johnny. But they might suspect him if they ever found out that Johnny didn't do it, and they might find that out if Johnny ever came back. So the best thing to do was to see that he did not come back, and the best way to do that was to find Johnny and do away with him. Which he did. He killed Johnny and buried him, buried him so that no one would find his body, and in such a way that animals wouldn't be likely to dig him up --"

"And you found the grave," Eileen said coldly, drumming nervously with her fingers on the cover of the book in her lap. She continued to look out the window, her nerves on edge but well controlled.

"Yes. And yesterday I dug him up. His head had been bashed in with a stone or a club ---"

After a pause he repeated, "I dug him up with a shovel -- with a shovel."

Eileen had not heard what he said; she was thinking of something else.

She said, "How did he find Johnny?" And she looked at him sharply.

"Well, he might have met him on the road, on his way in to town," Albert said, avoiding her eyes.

She persisted, "Then how would you know where to find the

grave?"

"Well -- the truth is, not many people knew about it, but Jonnny lived in a little shack in the woods; and that's where this fellow looked for him and found him. And naturally that's where I looked for the grave."

Hate was shining from her eyes, but Albert would not look at her. "So you know who killed him because you know who knew about the shack."

He looked up in surprise. "No! I knew who the murderer was before I even looked for Johnny. I just figured out what his next move would be."

"I don't believe it," Eileen said.

He was hurt, and he wondered what she was thinking of.

"What's the matter with you?" he said wonderingly.

"I knew about the cabin," she said, "and I knew where it was, approximately."

"How did you know? -- Oh, I suppose -- "

She interrupted quickly. "Mr. Burton told me."

He was startled. "That proves it," he exclaimed, slapping his hand against his forehead.

"What?" she asked, but he wouldn't answer, unwilling to irritate her again.

Eileen continued. "That doesn't prove anything. Mr. Burton knows a lot more than anyone suspects."

"Listen," Albert said. "I dug up that grave with a shovel -- a shovel. Now suppose I were to walk..."

He stopped, and a crafty look came into his eyes, while

his lips smiled.

"Suppose I were to walk into Lawyer Burton's office with a shovel on my shoulder."

She wanted to sneer at him, but she grew thoughtful.

"Suppose you did," Eileen said, "and he reacted as though he were guilty. That would prove to you that he killed Johnny, but that's all. Not that he killed Mary."

"I know that," he said angrily. "Don't you think I know that? That would upset my whole theory. Because he's not the man I suspect. It would mean that Lawyer Burton suspected Johnny too, and went out and killed him to keep him from doing more harm or getting into more trouble." And spitefully he added, "I'd be glad to do that for my own brother."

But this time his spite did not affect Eileen; she hardly heard what he said. She wanted to say, "Whom do you suspect?" but she could not bring herself to it. She could not bring herself to offer a possible answer; she kept her mind away from the answer. At that moment her whole face brightened up and her eyes shone with happiness. Eric Tobin had appeared in front of the house.

At nine o'clock that morning Eric and his mother had stood by the station and waved goodbye to Cleone and Aunt Myra. It was a sad parting, and the more so for Eric because he could not make himself believe that it was necessary. But at any rate Cleone was gone, and he would miss her.

He had not prepared himself sufficiently against the feeling

of loneliness that came over him after she had gone. He had not let himself think about the accomplished fact of her departure; and so during the morning he wandered restlessly from place to place inside the house and outside, trying to busy himself with other thoughts, and trying to fill in the feeling of emptiness. But he could not concentrate, and so he resigned himself to feeling miserable.

Shortly after lunch he saw Tim Cadwell in the back yard, but Eric did not feel like facing his old friend at that moment. He saw Tim go to the garage and get a rake and a basket, walking slowly and looking expectantly toward the house as though hoping to see Eric come out and join him. Instead, Eric went up to his room and stretched out on his bed with his clothes on. In a few minutes his mind had sought the easiest refuge open to it, and he was fast asleep.

He slept for over an hour, and then he got up even though he did not feel rested and would gladly have slept a little longer. But he had the strange feeling that his plan of action for the next hour was completely formed in his mind and that all he had to do was to carry out the plan automatically, although in truth he had not consciously decided what he should do during the afternoon.

He got out of bed, washed, changed his clothes, putting on the suit he had worn to the Cadwell's; all his actions were mechanical -- he felt an inward compulsion to do something, and yet what he did seemed not to be dictated by his conscious mind, but by something outside of himself. Had he stopped to

think after he had finished drying his face, he would not have been able to say what his next act would be. And yet he went directly to his room, picked out his suit and changed his clothes. Then, in the same mechanical manner, he went downstairs, without seeing anyone, put on his coat and hat and went out the front door. As he descended the front steps and started down the drive, he realized for the first time that he was on his way to the home of Eileen and Albert.

Albert answered his knock and greeted him warmly, pumping his hand vigorously while he helped him off with his coat.

As soon as he entered the house Eric sensed a strained atmosphere, which Albert seemed to be trying to hide by the effusiveness of his greeting. Eileen, sitting in the living room with a closed book in her lap, seemed agitated, but she smiled at him in welcome and he felt that she was glad to see him..

He guessed that the two had been quarreling, but he would not have been able to tell from Albert's manner, for he seemed to be in a very good humor, although it seemed to Eric that much of his joviality and graciousness was assumed and artificial.

Eric was struck by the way Eileen kept glancing from him to her brother; she seemed to be studying them both, or studying the effect that one had on the other. This made him suspect that they had been talking about him just before he came in.

"Well, what's new?" Albert said. "What have you been doing since I saw you last? -- Let's see, that was Wednesday, wasn't it? Wednesday night. -- I'm sorry I wasn't here yesterday when you came; I had an important engagement with an old friend." Eric saw him flash a wink at Eileen. "But I called you up when I got back. You look kind of pale -- what have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing," Eric said. "Nothing. I've been making a few plans, but that's about all."

He told them about his plans for a farm. Albert seemed interested. Eric grew nervous under Eileen's steady gaze; she was looking at him thoughtfully, intently, with an expressionless face, and he found it painful to look into her deep black eyes, which seemed to be smouldering with some hidden thought.

When he had finished with the short sketch of his plans, Albert, who had been standing near him, slapped him jocularly on the shoulder.

"Good boy," he said. "That's a great idea. When you need a helper let me know." He laughed heartily. "See, I'm strong." And he doubled up his arm to show his muscle. "And I'm a willing worker. You won't find many willing workers in this country -- nobody wants to work. That's what this country needs, more willing workers. How about it, do I get the job?"

"You do," Eric said smiling. "I'll use you instead of a horse."

Albert laughed good-naturedly and sat down near Eric. He paid no attention whatever to his sister, as though she were not even in the room.

"You're not looking well, though," he repeated. "You've got to get out more in the open air, and get some sun."

"I have been outdoors quite a lot," Eric said. "I often go for long walks in the fields in back of my house and in the woods --"

They both seemed to be startled, and he wondered at them.

"Is that so strange? When I was a boy, I used to spend most of my time wandering around in the woods. It's very quiet and -- restful -- there, and everything is so soft, now that the frost is out of the ground --"

"Certainly not," Eileen said, looking at her brother. "Not strange at all. --- " Turning to Eric, she said warmly, "I love the woods, too. There's something about them that stirs your blood and makes you feel free of the whole world -- like a savage."

Albert leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs out, and said carelessly, "How do you know that the frost is out of the ground."

"Anybody would know that," Eileen said quickly, but Albert paid no attention to her.

Eric said, "I don't know; it just feels that way. Oh, yes I do know. I was digging in the garden the other day and there wasn't a sign of frost."

"That's just on the surface," Albert said. "Deeper down,

there's still frost I imagine, isn't there?"

"How should he know," Eileen said, looking at Eric with something in her eyes that he could not fathom.

Eric thought of the ploughed land he had seen at Tim Cadwell's, soft and just recently turned.

"No," he said. "It's all out, I think, all the way down."

Eric sensed that something was going on in his presence that he was not aware of. He felt as though he were sitting in a dark room, while all around him was some sort of activity which he could not see. At first he thought that he had said something that he should not have said, something that was displeasing, perhaps, to Albert, and Eileen was trying to excuse him, but failed to see how anything that he had said could be offensive. And then he thought that perhaps there was a secret understanding between Eileen and Albert, and that they were really paying no attention to him but were actually arguing by some indirect method against each other. Now As Eileen looked at him he thought he saw disgust and even fear in her eyes, as though he, Eric, was repellent to her, as though she had suddenly found something to despise in him. Albert was looking at him thoughtfully, examining him as though he saw some new feature that he had never noticed before; his eyes were cold, studiously objective.

Cold fear gripped his heart. Was he acting strangely? Had these two seen something in his actions that he did not know was there?

Suddenly Albert got up and without a word went out into

the kitchen. Eric looked at Eileen questioningly, but she avoided his eyes. After a moment she too got up and walked over to within a few feet of him. She seemed afraid to come any nearer.

"Listen," she said in a low voice, "I don't believe you could do such a thing. I don't believe, and I won't. It's not possible. But if you did -- "

At that moment a knock came at the front door, and Eileen started as though she had heard a shot.

Eric felt his head buzzing. He smiled weakly, a little foolishly, at Eileen's alarm; he knew just as surely as though he could see through the wall of the house that it was Natalie Comfort at the door.

Eileen took a step toward the hall and then turned and said rapidly in a fierce whisper, "He's gone out to get a shovel. Do you hear? A shovel -- Understand? He's going to bring it in... He is..."

Natalie Comfort stood in the doorway, swaying slightly, her face as pale as death.

In a croaking voice she said, "I knocked --"

Eric stood up quickly in alarm.

"Mrs. Comfort," he said, "you're sick. Let me help you."

"No," Natalie said, and her voice was no stronger than a loud whisper. "I'm all right." She was looking fixedly at Eileen, who stood transfixed a few feet away.

Eric saw Eileen, for the first time since he had known her, completely helpless and at a loss; she did not know what

to do or say. A weak, uncertain smile appeared on her face, and her lips formed the word "Mother," although it was hardly audible.

Natalie heard her, took a step forward. She moved as though there were lead weights tied to her limbs. She started to raise her hands, still swaying, her lips as white as her face.

On the other side of the room, Albert appeared, coming in from the kitchen, with a shovel on his shoulder. Paying no attention to anyone in the room except Eric, with his eyes glued to Eric's face he raised the shovel from his shoulder and held it in both hands as though he were presenting arms with a gun. He held the concave face of the shovel toward Eric to show the caked yellow clay.

Eric looked at him wonderingly, but with no sign of fear or guilt. Eileen, too, for the moment was looking searchingly into Eric's face.

In the utter silence that reigned, a sound that was half sigh and half moan issued from Natalie's lips, and she slumped to the floor on her face in a dead faint. For the space of a few seconds no one moved. Eric, looking from Natalie to Albert, saw a shudder pass over his body and saw a lump of clay dislodge itself from the face of the shovel and plunk to the floor at Albert's feet.

A half-hour later Eileen and Albert sat alone in the same room. Their mother, recovered, had insisted on getting back

to the Tobin house, and Eric had taken her home in a taxi. They had asked her to stay, and Eileen had offered to make the extra bed upstairs so that she could lie down, but Natalie had once more retired into her shell. Evidently she considered her visit a failure and did not wish to prolong the strain. She had left as soon as she was able to stand, without saying why she had come.

"It was just a coincidence," Albert said after she had left. He added bitterly, "She can't stand us; she can't stand the sight of her children, and when she saw me -- and she's sick, anyway -- she just passed out. It was the strain."

"She wanted to make it up," Eileen said. "I'm sure she did. Something came over her, and she wanted to be friendly with us. But she just couldn't do it."

"I don't understand -- ", but he didn't finish. He paced up and down the room nervously, looking now and then at the snovel, which was leaning against the wall near the kitchen door.

"She hates us really; she always has," Eileen said. She sat in the chair by the window, which Eric had previously occupied. "Something had happened to her, though. She wanted to see us. She almost took me in her arms, just before you came in."

"Did she look sick when she came in?"

"Yes. She seemed ready to drop."

"Still -- " He stopped and looked moodily at the lump of clay at his feet. Then he backed away from it as though it

were alive, and after that he avoided coming near it as he walked.

Albert looked at Eileen. "You told him why I went out, didn't you?"

"Yes." She would not look at him.

"How did he look -- guilty?"

"No. Not a sign.. He didn't know what it was all about." She turned her face toward him, lighted up for a moment with happiness. "He didn't do it. You can't imagine how good he is; he could never do such a thing. I never thought so for a moment. You were cruel to him. But you don't know him as I do."

Albert continued his walking, his head down, his brows knit in a moody frown. "I know he didn't. I just brought the shovel in on the spur of the moment. Just practice."

"Then he's not the one you suspected?"

"No."

She sighed with relief. "I still think it was Johnny."

"O. K.," he said. "Forget it. And don't open your mouth about this to a soul. Not a soul. About the shovel, I mean. Understand?"

She nodded, too much relieved to resent his tone.

"Do you promise?"

"Yes."

Albert sat down and lit a cigarette. In silence he smoked until the cigarette was finished. Eileen sat looking out the window, absorbed by her own thoughts, casually noticing

that it was getting dark out.

Finally Albert spoke in a soft voice. "Eileen," he said, and paused.

She turned regretfully away from the window. Her brother's face was almost hidden by the dusk, but she could see the motion of his hand as he stroked his forehead.

"When are you going to move?" he said.

She felt sorry for him. His voice sounded lonely and wistful, and she wondered whether he was sincere or just acting.

"Tomorrow afternoon."

In the quiet of the evening the whistle of a train sounded, loud at the beginning and then faint at the end, as if the train were going away instead of approaching. It was the same train which had brought them and Eric, the little Mattison girl and her mother, to Keton just a week ago. The sound of the engine was not yet audible to them; the train was still ten miles away. Neither could speak for some time, each reacting in his own way to the sound of the whistle.

"I don't want you to go," Albert said.

"I can't stand it here any longer."

"Why?"

"You ask why! -- But never mind that; I'm not going to get excited. -- I want to change my life, that's why. I want to be independent and not be domineered over by you wherever I go and whatever I do. And I'm sick of quarreling with you all the time. We never see each other without quarreling."

Albert's voice was so low that it could scarcely be heard.

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"Suppose I promise not to quarrel with you, not to domineer?"

She laughed harshly. "You've promised that before, and it's lasted for a day."

"But I mean it this time. I don't want you to go. I don't want you to leave me."

"Why?"

He was silent for a time, and then he spoke, with an obvious effort.

"Do you remember when we were little? Lately I've been thinking of those times more and more. We were always together. I used to take care of you wherever we'd go. I protected you. I would have protected you against anyone or anything no matter what. We were happy then, we never quarreled, except those little quarrels that didn't mean anything. If anyone said anything against you then, I should have wanted to kill him on the spot. If anyone touched you -- do you remember one time we went into Ayres' grocery store, and Lew Ayres began to stroke your head with his hand, and he bent down to kiss you and I pushed my fist into his face -- do you remember that? And I was only six. I was jealous, and I've hated him ever since. We loved each other, you and I."

He paused. In the darkness, neither could see the face of the other. The whistle of the train sounded again, nearer; very faintly they could hear the churn-churn of the engine.

Albert continued. "And then we gradually grew apart. I don't know how or when. In high school you made friends and I didn't; I felt that you had deserted me. And besides I was

ashamed of loving you; I thought it was weak -- or else that was just a defense I made up against your desertion. When people began to talk about you, I felt like killing them, but I sneered at myself -- I went to the other extreme; I urged them on to say things against you; I said worse things about you to them. In that way I was trying to kill my love. But in my heart I would rend those people limb from limb."

The knuckles of his hands cracked, sounding like explosions in the stillness of the room.

"It wasn't till I came back from the Navy that I actually began to hate you. I saw that you had changed. You were more beautiful than ever, but your soul had changed; and I hated you for changing, because I couldn't respect you any more."

His voice was singularly calm, but occasionally the effort which he was exerting to keep it that way was revealed by the rasping way in which he pronounced a word, and by a slight trembling and uncertainty in his tone.

"People began to look at me with respect because of my own ability, and with pity because of you. I detested their pity. I wanted to say, 'She is my sister, as good as any of you and as good as I; and I love her because she is my sister and because she is so good.' But all the time I knew that people were talking about you, saying things that were true and things that were not true. Do you wonder that I was irritable, ready to quarrel whenever we were together?"

Eileen said nothing. Her bowed head was silhouetted against the window and the half-light outside. She did not

move.

"Do you know now why I don't want you to go?"

Without moving, she answered. Her voice was hard. "Yes. Because if I do, people will talk all the more. They'll say that I'm having men up in my room. They'll feel all the more sorry for you, and you'll feel all the more sorry for yourself."

"No!" For the first time he raised his voice.

"Yes."

Albert stood up, went over beside her, towering above her.

Fiercely he said, "I don't want you to go because I need you with me. You're my sister and I still love you. I have never hated you. That was a lie that I told to myself. You can't leave me."

"But I can, and I will."

The train thundered into the station, and the earth vibrated gently beneath the house. The hiss of escaping steam mingled with the hiss of Albert's sharply drawn gasp of breath.

Still perfectly motionless and looking straight ahead, Eileen said, "Until I heard the train-whistle tonight I was undecided; I thought maybe I could begin my new life right here in this house, if you really wanted me. But then I realized that I can't go through with it; there's no new life for me, here or anywhere else. There's something in my blood -- and I felt it tonight when the train whistled -- it won't let me rest. It never will."

"What do you mean?" He had turned his back on her now, his fists clenched tightly at his side. Inch by inch he

dragged himself away from her.

Eileen said, "Next Sunday when the train comes in I'll be on it, coming back to Keton."

XVI

Mrs. Tobin, with Natalie Comfort's help, had at last finished her spring cleaning, although she continued to find little things to do that she had forgotten. Never before had she been so late, and for the last few days, tidy soul that she was, she had been in a continual fret at her tardiness. Here it was the second week in May; all her neighbors and friends had long ago finished their cleaning, and she had just barely come to the end.

It was excusable -- practically unavoidable. Myra's long visit, in the first place, had completely upset her plans. Her sister would have been willing to help, of course, but that was unthinkable; she could not allow her guests to work, not even if the guest was one's own sister -- and anyway Myra needed the rest and deserved it.

And then the excitement of Eric's return, and getting used to his presence around the house. He needed to be taken care of, to be watched, and it was her duty as a mother to do everything in her power to facilitate his complete recovery and to stand guard over his mental health. This too, the worry that he caused her, unwittingly, added to her burden and upset her household plans. But she had not the slightest regret on that score; she would have given the rest of her life to him if it would insure his happiness and peace of

mind -- yes, she would do that gladly.

Then to crown it all, Natalie had taken sick right after Myra and Cleone had left -- had just suddenly taken to her bed that Sunday evening -- Myra had left in the morning -- and she had stayed in bed for a week. She seemed too weak to stand up, too weak to move or to talk; she had lain like a stone in her bed, white and silent, refusing to see a doctor and refusing to say what was the matter with her. There was no doubt that she was sick, but at a time like that her sickness was very inconvenient.

Because, neat and thorough though she was, Mary Tobin was far from efficient, in housework or in any other work. Of this she was well aware. She was, in fact, too thorough; and hence she was slow. She could not discriminate between some little task that required nothing more than a lick and a promise and some major job that required all her care and all her energy. To everything equally she gave her fullest attention and her most painstaking efforts. She was at her best when she had someone working for her; for she was an excellent superintendent, she could see what had to be done, and she could plan a day's work like a field marshall -- but she needed someone to do the work who knew how to work. Naturally she missed Natalie sorely while she was sick.

But one day in the second week of May Natalie got up and went about her daily tasks as though nothing had happened, the same efficient, tireless, silent worker that she had always been. And in a week the work was done, spring cleaning was

over for another year.

Mary Tobin was then able to give some of her time to her flower garden, which she had regretfully neglected until now. Eric had spaded up the beds for her one day, a job which Tim Cadwell usually performed, and she had begun setting out some of the bulbs which were rotting away in the cellar. This task she particularly liked, because she could give as much time and care to it as she wished without feeling that she was neglecting anything else.

"Y'oughta have a mighty fine garden this year, Mis Tobin," Tim said, "with two men and yourself takin' care of it."

Mary Tobin liked the old man; she had known him for years, and she knew that he was devoted to her and to Eric. She ventured to ask his opinion about Eric's farming idea.

"Best thing in the world for him, Mis Tobin. There's nothin' more settlin' to a man's mind than farmin', except maybe fishin'. And this'd make mighty fine farm land. You got plenty of land, good soil, and a good barn. Take a little cultivatin', but that's the fun of farmin' -- if 'twas all play there'd be nothin' to it, no fun. Take me her instance, there's nothin' I like better than to go to work on a dried-up old weed patch, weed it out, plough it up, fertilize it and then plant something. And then work like a horse to keep the weeds from springin' up again. After a year or so it's a garden, and one of the best in the country."

"Do you think Eric can do it?"

"Sure do. Sure can. Surest thing in the world -- if he'd

only get started. "What's holdin' him up?"

Mrs. Tobin shook her head, and a worried look appeared on her face.

"You might help him, Tim. I think he needs someone to give him a start. He wants to do it, I'm sure, but he just can't seem to get started. For two weeks now he hasn't done a thing about it."

"Well, I'll see what's eatin' him."

Mrs. Tobin was more worried about Eric than she was willing to admit. He seemed neither well nor happy; she was sure that he was not improving as rapidly as he should, although at first she had noticed a decided improvement, an uplift in his spirits, a sparkle in his eye, and, most important of all, happiness in his face and manner. And when he had suddenly become so enthusiastic about the farm, she felt that her cup was running over.

But of late he seemed to be absent-minded and listless. He no longer spoke about the farm, and avoided her direct questions in reference to it. His face seemed strained and weary, and often she saw a troubled look in his eyes.

A few days ago she had written to the doctor at the asylum, Doctor Sharon, and told him her fears, asking his advice. There had been no answer yet.

She was worried, too, that he spent so much of his time with Albert Comfort. True she did not know Albert very well -- and she knew nothing that she could hold against him, unless it was his treatment of his mother, but then perhaps Natalie

was just as much to blame for that as he was -- but, somehow, instinctively perhaps, she distrusted him; she was doubtful that Eric could derive any benefit from intimacy with Albert. In fact she was afraid that only harm could result from too close an acquaintance. But she was too timid to say so to her son, not trusting her own judgment enough to be sure that she was right.

Eric had been going out rather frequently at night during the last week or two, saying nothing to her of where he was going or where he had been, except to say that he was visiting friends. She learned that he was visiting Albert's sister, Eileen, who had taken a small apartment in Burton Block.

She learned this in a roundabout way.

Mary Tobin belonged to a bridge club, consisting of some eight to twelve members, which met each week and often as many as two or three times a week, at the homes of various members. They were all mediocre players, but they enjoyed themselves nonetheless, and they spent many pleasant and harmless evenings playing and chatting. Mary enjoyed these evenings as much as anyone, as she was just as poor a player as the rest, and a better conversationalist than most.

As they played one evening, the conversation began to turn about Eileen Tobin, which was not unusual.

"I see," said Sheila Barnes, a sharp-faced, thin-lipped woman, whose husband was Keton's night-policeman, "I see that Eileen Comfort and Martha Mattison are thick as thieves again. You'd think Martha would have learned her lesson after what

happened last year."

"You'd think she would, wouldn't you," said her friend, Mathilda O'Donnel, called Mat for short.

"Nothing like turning the other cheek," Shiela said. Mat giggled.

"You mean her husband's other cheek," said Mrs. Will Ashley, the mailman's wife, a big, plump-faced woman, who was very frank and fair, but whose thoughts ran somewhat to the salacious. She often shocked her friends by her outspoken comments on sex and by the dirty jokes she told with evident enjoyment. She was Mary Tobin's partner in the bridge game.

"I think that was just gossip," Mary Tobin said. "I don't believe Eileen had anything to do with John Mattison; people just misinterpreted her friendship for Martha. After all, now could anyone prove such a thing."

"Such things don't have to be proved," Shiela said, smacking her thin lips decisively. "Appearances are enough when they're as damning as that."

"Damning as what?" Maud Ashley asked.

"You know what I mean, Maud Ashley. Her going there every night when he was home, and then when he was laid off, going there during the day. And he used to come up to the office and see her, too."

"That's not very dangerous; with Lawyer Burton's fishy eye on them, they couldn't accomplish very much."

Mrs. Tobin said, "You can't always go by appearances."

"Well, what about her going to New York every week-end --

that certainly means something, and Alice Dorn saw her there once with a man, old enough to be her father, in a night club. They were drinking." Shiela looked at her hand without realizing that it was her play.

"Play, Shiela," Maud Ashley said.

"She'd take up with anything that wore pants," Mat O'Donnell said. She was forty-two and unmarried.

"I prefer them without," said Maud, and Mat gasped.

"I think she's a good girl at heart," Mary Tobin said.

Shiela said, "So does your son, evidently." Shiela bit her lip, half glad and half provoked that she had said it.

Then it all came out, and Mary Tobin learned that Eric was calling quite frequently on Eileen. Shiela's husband, the night-policeman, had seen him several times, both when he went in and when he came out. Not that there was anything very wrong about that, as they all admitted, but Eileen had that reputation -- etc.; and Mrs. Tobin felt rather upset for the rest of the evening.

But again she was too timid to question Eric, although she felt that it was her duty to caution him. She excused herself by saying, to herself, that he knew better than she whether Eileen was good or bad, and by continuing to believe that much that was said about her was idle gossip. Nevertheless, this was an added worry, and poor Mrs. Tobin watched her son with growing apprehension..

Finally, a few days later, an answer to her letter came from Dr. Sharon, which aggravated rather than alleviated her

fears. It was very brief and abrupt. It said, "He should have some useful and interesting work to do. He should live a simple, regular, and normal life. He should avoid excitement. He should not become involved in other people's troubles, as he has an excessively sensitive and sympathetic nature, almost morbidly so. I have told him all this, and that is as much as I can do."

Mrs. Tobin left the letter lying around on the living room table, hoping that Eric would see it and read it, but she never knew whether that ever happened.

Albert Comfort had given up the search, convinced that his first theory was wrong and unable to pick up any definite thread leading to another conclusion.

On the morning after his mother's visit he went through with the plan he had thought of on his way back from Johnny's grave, and which he had tested out on Eric. At eleven o'clock he had peered into Lew Ayres' store, and seeing that no one was there besides Lew he went in, with the shovel in the crook of his arm as one might hold a gun, with the point down and the face forward so that the yellow clay on the blade was perfectly visible. He looked steadfastly into Lew Ayres' face.

Lew had his back turned when Albert came in; standing at the back of the store, he was sorting lemons in a bushel basket, picking out bad ones and putting them in an empty box beside him.

Lew Ayres' asthma was worse. He had some difficulty now in speaking, especially in the mornings; his eyes watered, and

his nose was always red -- and he was afflicted with a rasping, phlegmy cough. But, strangely enough, Lew felt that during the last two days his health had improved tremendously, and that now he was a completely well man.. He had been working since Friday noon, had had a long, hard day on Saturday, and had spent Sunday cleaning up around his place. Sunday night he had slept blissfully, only to wake up Monday morning hardly able to speak on account of the hoarseness in his throat, and with a knife-like pain in his chest every time he coughed.

Still, Lew thought that he was better, almost entirely well; he felt better, full of energy, ready to face life. And the reason for this was that he was once again at peace in his mind. He had gone through a very unpleasant mental experience; he had had a devastating mental and moral shock, the like of which he had never known before, and which had completely upset his usual equilibrium. He was under no illusions concerning this experience; he realized that it had been critical, that it might well have had serious results. Lew blamed it partially on his age, feeling that he had gone through something corresponding to the menopause in women, which had for a few days taken his personality into its grip and almost wrenched it loose from its fastenings; and he blamed it partially on the fact that, through no fault of his own, he was sexually abnormal..

During the days he had been in bed he had reasoned it all out. All through his life there had been this sexual deviation, which he would not admit to himself but which nevertheless

influenced his thoughts and some of his actions. Then one day a sex-maniac had killed a little girl whom he knew. At the same time he had reached a turning point, through age, in his personality, which, by producing a seething restlessness in his mind, had left his mind all too vulnerable to the attack of remorse, and doubt, and self-accusation which had suddenly come upon it. This, he reasoned, was what had happened:: the crime against little Mary Mattison was a crime that could have been committed by a person just like himself, with the same abnormal leanings. And that crime had made him aware of his own abnormality, which up until that moment he had not allowed himself to be aware of. Then, naturally, all the signs of his failing went by in review before his agitated inward gaze, and they were so prominent, so evident that he had been seized with an overwhelming fear that others had seen them and had suspected him before he suspected himself. Thus came the crisis.

And just at this time, while he was resting on his porch, half mad with doubt of himself and fear of others, a potential accuser had appeared in the form of Albert Comfort. Probably, Lew thought later, he had nothing but a harmless purpose in view, perhaps just gathering news for his paper, but Lew's fevered mind had interpreted his visit and his harmless words in an entirely erroneous light. And that had completed the shock.

When he got out of his bed Friday noon, Lew left behind him forty-eight hours of the most serious thinking he had ever

done in his life. But the fever of thought had gradually burned itself out and left him a weaker man physically but a stronger man mentally. This mental strength was misleading; it was this which made him feel that he was well when he was really ill. Although he did not realize it, he was now in great danger of a serious physical breakdown; for when the feeling of relief which now buoyed him up so remarkably had passed, he would crumple. So strong was this relief, however, that it was destined to support him for several weeks longer.

Albert, entering Lew's store Monday morning, saw Lew bent over a large bushel basket, with his back toward the front of the store. He took three steps into the store before Lew straightened up and looked around.

He watched Lew's face, which was red from his exertions and because he had been bending over. The flesh around his eyes was puffy, and his whole face seemed swollen. His mouth was open, for he could not breathe through his nose.

To Albert's amazement the chubby grocer smiled and greeted him pleasantly..

"Good morning, Albert," he said, in an asthmatic whisper. "Haven't seen you for some time." He lifted his apron to his face and wiped his brow. "Hot day, but I'm glad of it; it means that spring is here to stay. What can I do for you this morning?"

Albert shifted the shovel ostentatiously, staring fixedly at the grocer's face. The insinuating smile had died on Albert's lips and a puzzled, doubting frown wrinkled his brow, but his

gaze was still insultingly direct. Now that he was here he did not know what to say, for he had believed in his heart that Lew Ayres would react in a far different manner. He had expected anything but this calmness and indifference, and he stared at the beatific expression on the grocer's face.

"Been digging fishworms?" Lew said. "You ought to try my back yard some time; plenty of them there. I was digging in my garden the other day, yesterday I guess it was, and I turned up four or five with every spadeful."

Albert was confused, but he refused to give up. "I did my digging in the woods," he said, in slow measured accents, watching Lew's expression. "There's some woods out in back of the Tobin place; you go through the woods for about a mile due west, and come to a little cabin, then you turn right for about a hundred yards and dig there in a little cleared spot. You find some remarkable things."

"Oh come now," Lew said. "You don't have to go that far for fishworms." He laughed. "Why, man, you can get thousands of them in half an hour just ten yards behind my house. Now don't you go traveling that far again; just drop over to my house any time you want to and dig all you want. I guarantee--"

But Albert turned on his heel and walked out.

Albert walked back home, pale with rage and shame. He threw the shovel savagely toward the shed where it was kept, stamped bitterly into the house, and sat down in the living room. He was wrong; there was no doubt of it. He felt that Lew Ayres had done him a personal injustice by proving himself

innocent.

Later, as his indignation wore off and was replaced by a mood of savage moroseness, he realized that Lew Ayres' successful passing of the test had been only a half-way vindication; after all he might well have been guilty of the crime against Mary Mattison without having thought of the other, of killing Johnny Kinney in order to cover himself.

But in that case, who had killed Johnny? Eileen's half-spoken suggestion was plausible, that Lawyer Burton had killed him -- his brother -- to protect him from the law and to keep him from doing any further damage.

So that afternoon Albert retrieved the shovel, and, driven more by curiosity now than by the animosity which had prompted him before, he marched into Lawyer Burton's suite of rooms, past his sister's desk, and into the lawyer's private office.

Sitting behind his desk, the little lawyer looked larger than he actually was; his shoulders, though sloping, were heavy and broad, and his head, bristling with an unkempt crop of dirty-white hair, was huge, almost abnormally large.

It was the first time Albert had ever seen him in his office. On the street he seemed a very ordinary sort of man, short, thin, and unimpressive. But here he seemed to be enthroned -- dominant, aggressive, formidable. Albert felt immediately uneasy and ridiculous.

Lawyer Burton looked up from a typewritten page he was reading and fixed Albert with a fish-cold stare from under bushy white eyebrows.

"Well?" he said. His thin, deeply lined face showed no sign of life, except that after he had spoken his lips remained slightly parted, and the gold tooth in front showed through.

Now that he was here, Albert did not know what to say. He was uncomfortably aware that the man in front of him was stronger than he, a man who could dominate him intellectually; he felt as though he were being hypnotized and that unless he summoned all his strength he would be completely in the other man's power. The shovel, which he held with both hands by the handle, with the point resting in front of him on the floor, seemed to gather size until it was almost big enough for him to hide behind; and yet all the time that he stood there, the other man did not seem even to notice the shovel. Albert felt like a little boy who had been caught torturing his pet cat.

"What do you want?" the lawyer repeated, looking at Albert without blinking.

Albert tried desperately to think of something to say. Then in a panic he turned and started out of the office. He had a confused impression of Eileen's startled face looking at him from her desk in the other office, and then the lawyer's voice halted him and turned him around.

"Wait a minute."

Albert did not meet the other man's eyes; instead he looked at the letter which Mr. Burton held in his hand. That hand was as steady as a rock.

"Why did you bring that shovel in here?"

Standing in the doorway between the two offices, Albert

looked stupidly at the shovel, and a crafty smile came to his lips.

"So you noticed the shovel," he said; "I thought you didn't see it."

"If a man walked into your office with a shovel in his hands, don't you think you'd notice it?"

"Yes, of course, but you didn't seem to notice it, or pretended not to." Albert was gathering confidence. The smile gave way to an expression of thoughtfulness.

The gold tooth became a little more prominent.

Lawyer Burton said, "I've made it a rule to be polite even to boors."

Albert's face grew dark and the knuckles of his hand grew white as he clenched the handle of the shovel. For a second the gazes of the two men locked, and the younger man was the weaker. Albert turned slowly and walked out, and Lawyer Burton sat staring at the door through which he had gone.

For a long time Lawyer Burton sat motionless, the typewritten paper still in his hand, his eyes fixed on the empty doorway.

Once he held his hands up in front of his face and looked ruefully at the blisters on the palms.

Lawyer Burton stayed in his office until late that night. He busied himself fitfully with some odds and ends of work, but most of the time he sat at his desk without moving, his head bent in thought, as though he were waiting for an appointment.

At last he got up and turned out the light in his office. He opened a window from the bottom and looked out. Below him was the river, and on his right was the street and the bridge. After looking out the window for some time, he went to a closet in the office and unlocked the door with a key which he took from his coat pocket. After fumbling within the recesses of the closet, he withdrew, with a short-handled shovel in his hand. He walked to the window, and after looking out again to see that no one was near, he launched the shovel into space.

There was a loud smack as the shovel hit the water.

On the next day, after spending many hours thinking and wracking his brain for a solution, Albert washed his hands of the whole affair. Now that he no longer suspected Lew Ayres, he found no incentive in going on; for his desire to solve the crime had been based mainly on prejudice, and he realized this. He hated Lew Ayres, and had hated him since he was a child; and the incident which had caused him to hate the fat little grocer, of which he had told Eileen in his burst of confidence on Sunday night, was the same incident which caused him, on remembering it, to suspect the grocer's abnormality. After his visit to Lawyer Burton, he was renewed in his conviction that the person who committed the first crime had committed the second. But Albert was no longer interested, and he ceased to think about it.

He was troubled by a much more personal problem than this, a problem which seemed to loom larger in his life every day

and which caused him a great deal of unrest, caused him to grow more and more sullen, vindictive, and savagely introspective as time went on. This was his sister Eileen and the growing strain in his relations with her.

She had moved, just as she had threatened, and was now living in Burton Block. He could not forgive her for this, for the contempt she had shown for his love and for his offer to be kinder and more brotherly to her; not simply because it left him alone, one of the most completely lonely men in that little town, but because of the lack of regard her moving showed for him, the lack of affection -- for his heart hungered for affection, for his sister's love. And he realized that his brotherly affection for her was not returned, that she did not love him and in fact probably detested him. This blow to his pride he could not forgive.

Although he would not admit it to himself, he still cared for his sister; which was not strange, for he had once virtually worshipped her, and even when he could no longer respect her, he had continued to love her with a fierce, jealous, brooding love, the extent of which even he did not realize.

Now he felt her desertion as the last straw that would break the back of his love for her. He resolved to despise her. He knew that to hate his sister was the only way to keep the thought of her from torturing him. Like most brothers, he was a moral puritan where his sister was concerned, and the knowledge of her transgressions hurt him bitterly; and the fact that people knew and talked of her sins was also a bitter pill. But

even more terribly bitter than these was his jealousy, a blind, unreasoning, inexplicable jealousy that ate at his heart like a canker worm. If he could hate her, all this would be changed, and he would have peace.

He thought that he could create and foster and nourish a hatred for his sister that would release him.

Another thought, too, had crept into his mind and had persisted. It had come on the night of his confession to Eileen of the love he had borne her when they were children, on the night his mother had come and had left after fainting. He had confided in her with the hope that she might be moved to stay on, not to move, and perhaps even to change her way of life. It had cost him a great deal to speak thus to his sister; never before had he done so; and the recital had moved him more than he thought possible. And then when he had stood over her, mutely begging with his heart, she had all but laughed in his face. He had turned away at that moment to keep himself from throttling her, for his hands had convulsed with a flashing from his angry heart to bury his fingers in her white throat. He had controlled the impulse, but the thought lived on.

In trying to conquer his jealousy he was fighting a losing battle as the weeks went on. The knowledge that she was still taking her week-end trips to New York added fuel to the fire, and gave rise to a strange sort of self-torture. Every Sunday night, just before the train from New York came in, he would hide himself behind a tree in the little patch of woods across from the railroad station, and there he would await the

approaching train. As the sound of the train coming nearer grew more and more distinct, he would become more and more agitated, try as he might to control himself. The sweat would gather in his armpits and roll down his muscular arms and the side of his body. His face would begin to twitch nervously, especially around the mouth, and when the train pulled into the station his whole body would be seized with uncontrollable nervous tremblings. Lying flat on his stomach behind the tree and peering around it, he would look under the train, which was between him and the station, and try to identify the passengers by their legs, the only part that he could see from his position. He could always recognize his sister's legs, no matter how many people got off the train, and he would watch them as they walked along beside the train until her whole body came into view at the rear of the last coach. Then he would watch her as she walked up on the side of the street toward town, until she was out of sight. As soon as she was out of sight and he could leave without being seen, he would go home, calm but bitter and brooding.

These incidents were torture to him, both during their occurrence and after, but he could not help himself. He could no more stop himself from spying on her than he could stop living and breathing.

His torture continued until one night in the middle of June.

Anyone who had known Eileen Comfort for a long time would have said that at this period in her life she was happier than

she had ever been before. And Eileen thought so too; she confessed as much to her friend Martha Mattison.

These two ate lunch together every weekday at Peterson's, a little restaurant on the other side of the bridge from Burton Block.. Martha's husband was working in Rutland and came home only on weekends, and Martha herself went back to a job which she had held previous to her marriage, that of dress-maker and saleslady in the Style Shop, a neat little store for women. She felt that the work would help her to forget her recent trouble and would keep her from getting lonely.

Eileen and Martha offered a striking contrast as they sat near the window at Peterson's eating their mid-day meal -- Martha with her faded blond hair, her plain, serious face, and her kind, sincere gray eyes; and Eileen, dark, beautiful, and inscrutable, with her capricious moods and her stormy, unpredictable nature. Yet they were the best of friends.

"There goes your brother," Martha said, looking out the window at Albert, who was walking on the opposite side of the street.

A momentary look of unrest came to Eileen's face, quickly passed, leaving her serene and gay again.

She said carelessly, "He's just checking to see whether I got back last night." It was Monday morning, and Eileen was unaware that Albert already knew of her return, since he had been at his usual place behind the tree near the station on the night before.

Her friend looked at her seriously. "Why do you keep

making those trips to New York? People say awful things about you -- of course I know they're not true, but it's so foolish to cause people to talk when there's no reason."

"If there wasn't a reason, they'd make one up," Eileen said, her eyes flashing with spite. "And besides I enjoy myself in New York. Let them talk. This place is so dead that I'd die too if I had to stay here all week for week after week. I'm young, and I want life, I want to live. And I'm living. I'm happy. What more can anybody want?"

"You make me afraid sometimes, you're so reckless," Martha said.

Eileen looked at her friend with affection. She longed to take Martha into her confidence and tell her of the good times she had, of the adventure, the zest; but that might lead to further confessions, or might lead her to guess -- and then little puritannical Martha would be shocked, and their friendship would be ended.

"Never fear," Eileen said gaily. "What could happen to me?" She said this so innocently that Martha was completely disarmed. "And I'm happy," she insisted. "Life is beautiful for me, interesting. I've never been so happy. I have a good job, I'm independent, and I'm secure here -- and on weekends I live."

"What about Eric?" Martha asked. She knew of her friend's growing intimacy with Eric and approved of it; she liked him and was delighted that Eileen and he had come to be friends.

Eileen was silent for some time. "I don't know," she

said at last. She was sober and thoughtful now and during the rest of the meal; the mention of Eric's name and the thought of him caused her somewhat painful misgivings. It was always the same when she heard him spoken of or when she thought of him, and so it would continue for some time to come.

Eileen had not seen Eric as many times as his mother had been led to believe, nor had their intimacy during that month, the month of May, become very pronounced. He had been up to her apartment just twice, the first time on the day she moved, to help her arrange the furniture, and the second time about two weeks later when she had invited him to have supper with her. On both occasions he had left early, about ten o'clock.

She had not seen him, for very long at a time, more than four or five times besides these. Once he had taken her to a movie in town, and one evening he had taken her to dinner in Bristol -- she remembered how sad and preoccupied he had seemed at Bristol, and then had brightened up after they left. Then several times she had gone for long walks with him at night, all so very unexciting but at the same time giving her more pleasure than she thought possible to get from such prosaic events.

Each time they took the same walk.. They would start at Burton Block, walk up to the Congregational church, turn right down the east arm of the cross, and stroll leisurely along the macadam road, talking sometimes, but more often swinging along in perfect silence. Sometimes as they were passing the Mattison's house they stopped in for a few minutes' visit with

Martha, and then they would continue on their way. A little way beyond the Mattison house they would turn into the hidden driveway, bordered by thick briar bushes which grew between it and Martha's house; the driveway had no other use than as a turnstile for cars, which would swing in here, back up, and thus reverse their direction. But Eileen and Eric used it to start their short climb to the top of a knoll that rose in an open field near the Mattison's. On the top of this knoll they would sit on a flat rock, from which they had an excellent view of the lights of Keton and of the moonlit mountains which surrounded them.

Here they sat and talked quietly, listening to the piping of the tree toads, the croaking of frogs in the nearby river, the distant barking of a dog on outlying farms, and the other individual sounds of the spring night. They watched the moon rise, and kept a sharp eye out for falling stars. They watched the lights of Keton blinking through the trees and tried to pick out and name the houses from which each light came; the light from the Congregational church steeple dominated all, and the light from Eric's house, about a mile away in front of them and to their left, could easily be distinguished.

At these times Eileen knew a kind of happiness which she had never known before. She had that type of mind, not unusual in women, which was able to disassociate the present moment from all the past, which was able to forget at will anything which it did not want to remember. Thus, when she was with Eric, she forgot her brother, she forgot her weekends in New

York, she forgot her job, and she forgot the unpleasant things that she knew people were saying about her. And she was grateful to Eric for never mentioning these things, although she knew he was aware of all of them and that for some reason or other Albert and he had become friends.

So the weeks of May passed, and then one Friday night in the second week of June

Eric said, "Wait, I've got to find out what that is."

They stood still in the middle of the gravel driveway that led toward their knoll. Above the thick briar hedge they could see a light in the Mattison house about fifty yards away.

"Do you see it?" Eric asked. Every time we've come this way I've looked at that and wondered what it is."

"Where?" Eileen asked, leaning against his shoulder and looking in the direction that his finger pointed. "Oh, yes. What is it? It looks like a cat's eyes, but it's too far above the ground for that."

They were looking at a pinpoint of reflected light that came from the midst of the briar bushes, about a foot above the ground.

"It may be a tin can; they shine like that sometimes, or a bottle. I'm going to find out."

Eric knelt down and thrust his hand carefully into the bushes, pulled it out several times as the thorns scratched his arm and hand. At last he found the object which was making the reflection. He held it up for Eileen to see.

It was a little purse, a child's pocketbook, with a metal

rim that reflected the light of the moon as they looked at it..

"Mary's!" Eileen said softly, looking toward the lighted window of the neighboring house. "Poor little thing, she must have lost it, or else the.... or else it was thrown there by... someone."

They stood looking at it together. It was empty, weather-worn and somewhat rusty.

"Better not to give it to Mrs. Mattison, don't you think?"

"No. Keep it," Eileen said. "Or throw it away."

Eric put it into his coat pocket, and they went on.

This incident affected both of them, and they sat silent on the flat rock for almost a half hour, each thinking somberly of that tragic event of two months before. Eileen was the first to come out of the gloom.

"Forget it," she said. "Look at the stars -- aren't they beautiful tonight. We can't be remembering those things for ever and ever; it doesn't do anyone any good, and it takes the sparkle out of life. Forget it."

She looked at Eric's sober face, which in the moonlight seemed pale and drawn, more strained than she had ever seen it before.

"What's the matter?" she said tenderly, with concern in her voice. But he did not answer.

Eileen was used to his silences, and so she kept quiet for a few minutes, although she wondered briefly what he was thinking about. She gave herself up to the beauty of the night, dismissing everything from her mind, forgetting that tomorrow

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she left for New York on the noon train, not to return until Sunday evening. She was perfectly content, content to be silent or content to talk, according to the whim of her companion; for with Eric, as with no one else, she felt completely at home. Gone in his presence were the capricious moods which she had indulged in earlier in their acquaintance and which still featured her character in the presence of anyone else. With him, she was herself, and glad of it.

Eric spoke, and his voice was very serious. "Eileen, I want to talk to you about Albert -- do you mind?"

She was startled -- and somewhat displeased.

"Go ahead," she said curtly.

He kept his head bent over his knees, which were tucked up to his chin, and his hands were folded across his legs.

"He's very unhappy," Eric said softly, and stopped.

"Well?"

"Well, that's about all. He just is."

Eileen said, "Can I help that?"

Eric thought for a moment. "Yes, I think you could."

"It's on account of you," he continued. "He... I think he really loves you, although he pretends to... not to. He worries continually about you, especially about... about..."

"What people say?"

"No. About your trips to... New York."

"Why should he worry?"

"That's natural; he's your brother."

"Stop talking about him, will you please. I don't like to

hear it. He's selfish, and all he cares about is what people are thinking about him, not about me. I'm independent now, and I'm not going to let him run me; I'll live my own life."

She was somewhat exasperated at Eric because she knew that he felt sorry for her brother, and because she suspected that Albert was trying to influence her through him. It was just like her brother, she thought, to act his way into Eric's sympathies, and thus get him to talk to her in his, Albert's favor. She was determined, however, to have as little as possible to do with her brother in the future. She did not believe that he loved her.

"All he cares about is what people say," she repeated.

"No," Eric said. "No. You're not fair to him."

"Don't talk about it," she said, more softly, looking at him beseechingly..

She could see that Eric was genuinely troubled and that he wanted to say more, but the subject was unpleasant to her; talk about her brother upset her -- and so she asked him to stop.

For a long time they sat perfectly still, saying nothing.. Eileen wondered, as she had wondered before, what Eric thought of her. She remembered the night, over a month ago, when she had said to him that all "that" was past -- meaning the trips to New York -- that she was going to change her life; and now she wondered why he had never reproached her for changing her mind, or even mentioned that she had broken her promise. She wondered if he loved her, and the thought struck her that perhaps he merely pitied her. Sometimes she had experienced a

feeling of pride over their friendship; it seemed like a vindication of her character, something that spiked the guns of those people who were so fond of reviling her behind her back. And at other times she felt conscience stricken for leading him on, for letting him become attached to her, when such an attachment should by all rights be contrary to his better judgment and might be more harmful than good.

And she tried to analyze her own feelings for Eric. She was sure that she did not love him, but she valued his company; she felt clean and wholesome in his presence, as though his own goodness and kindness of heart made her good and kind. She respected him because he was decent, and she felt an affection for him because he seemed to understand her, and because his regard for her seemed to be unselfish, almost impersonal. Fearfully at times she became aware that he knew her as well as she knew herself, and that he was perfectly capable of weighing her character in the balance of his own judgment; and she was afraid that if he did this she would be found wanting -- but perhaps his own fair mind and generous heart would throw in a couple of weights in her favor. --

At times she wished that the past had not been what it had been, and that she could stand before him clean and unashamed. She would have made him love her then, and she would love him.

Suddenly she asked, not knowing beforehand that she was going to speak, "What would you say if I told you that tomorrow I would not go to New York, and never would again."

"You asked me that once before," Eric said. "A month ago -- remember?"

"Yes," she said. "I was experimenting then. I was wondering what you would say, and what effect it would have on me if you wanted me to give it up. But I mean it now. I know that I can stop, can call all that past and done. I can do it; by an act of will I can make it as though the past hadn't existed. What would you say." She put her hand on his arm and looked earnestly into his face.

"Just what I said before," Eric answered softly, "that I'd be very happy for your sake. I don't think anything could make me happier."

She could see by his face that he was sincere.

"Do you love me?" she asked, almost fiercely..

He hesitated for just a moment and then said simply, "Yes."

Somehow Eileen felt a little bit faint and her breath came quickly. The hand on his arm trembled.

"Look, Eric," she said in an agitated voice, "I want you to do me a favor. Please do it. Leave me here alone and go home. I want to stay here for a little while, just a little while, and think everything through. Tomorrow afternoon at two come to see me; we'll have dinner at my apartment. We'll talk it all over. I can't think straight now. Please go, will you -- dear."

"Will you be all right?" he asked, looking at her doubtfully.

"Yes, of course. I won't stay long."

He got up, holding her hand in his own..

"You'll be here, in Ketton, tomorrow?"

She said impatiently, "Yes, I promise. Tomorrow at two.. Now go."

She watched him until he turned down the road at the end of the briar patch. She had hurried him away because she was afraid that she was going to be silly and cry.

For half an hour Eileen sat there, as motionless as the rocks in the field. She thought it all through very carefully, very fairly, and she made her decision. Tomorrow she would meet Eric in her apartment at two o'clock. He knew all, and still he loved her; and she knew now that she loved him.

When she went up the stairs leading to her apartment a little while later, there was a smile on her lips; her face was astonishingly beautiful, as though transfigured by some heavenly experience.

She paused uncertainly at the top of the stairs, for on the floor of the hall she saw the shadow of a man. The smile died on her lips as she looked at it, for she recognized it. It was the shadow of her brother.

He was standing by her door, facing her with his back against the doorsill. There was a strange, fixed smile on his face, and his sullen eyes burned with a light which she had never seen before.

Standing at the top of the stairs, she felt a sudden wave of fear, which she quickly conquered; and she noticed calmly that he had grown thinner and more pale than he had been when

she saw him last. She took notice of other little details: his suit was unpressed, his shirt dirty, and his tie askew. He looked as though he had not slept for a long time.

"Why are you here?" she asked. "Why aren't you working?"

He cleared his throat nervously before he spoke, and he emphasized his words as though they were full of meaning, a meaning which she failed to catch; the fixed smile remained on his lips while he spoke.

"There's no one in the office," he said. "Not a soul. No one knows that I'm here. No one saw me come up. I've been waiting here, right in this spot for an hour, without moving, waiting for you. I knew that you would come."

"What do you want?"

"I want to see you."

"Go away," she said.

"I want to talk to you."

"Go away."

"After I have talked with you."

"Then be quick about it." She advanced with the key to the door extended in her hand. He moved out of her way, and she opened the door. He did not take his eyes off her face, followed her into the room, and stood beside her when she turned on the light.

"Shut the door," she said.

He did so, and then returned to her side. He stood looking at her with the same fixed expression, which seemed to her idiotic.

She drew off the light sweater she was wearing and threw it across the back of a chair. Then she began straightening her hair, turning her back on him insultingly as she did so.

"What do you want?" she asked again.

"I want to know one thing," he said. "Are you going to New York tomorrow?"

She turned on him angrily. "What is it to you? If that's what you've come for, you can get out now. I'll do as I please, and you have nothing to say about it."

His face was as white as the plaster on the ceiling.

"Are you?"

She flaunted her independence. "Yes," she said, and then speaking to Eric in her mind she said no, I'm not really, dear -- never again. And the lovely smile on her lips was for Eric.

Before the smile had time to die, her neck snapped under her brother's maddened fingers.

When Eric left Eileen sitting on the little hill, he had decided to go straight home. But no sooner did he reach the road at the bottom of the hill than the surge of happiness which filled his heart to overflowing demanded an outlet, demanded that he confide in someone. As he passed Martha Mattison's house, he thought of stopping there, perhaps just to talk or perhaps actually to tell her what had happened that night, to tell her of his happiness and hopes. But Martha's light was out.

Farther on, he passed Lew Ayres' house, still lighted, and as he passed he thought of Albert and quickened his step. He would tell Albert -- why hadn't he thought of him before -- it was absolutely necessary to tell Albert, who would be pleased, relieved; it would change his whole attitude toward Eileen, make him happier and easier in his mind. He walked rapidly on toward town..

Eric had known for some time that Albert was very uneasy in his mind about Eileen. He did not know just how deeply Albert felt about his sister nor was he able to decide the exact nature of that feeling; but he noticed with some trepidation the signs of unrest in his friend, who grew more and more moody and unstable in temper. Eric would sometimes find him plunged in the deepest gloom, out of which nothing could coax him, and

these fits of depression might last for days. Again, he might find him in a perfect fever of excitement and artificial good spirits that knew no bounds, and this state of forced hilarity in his friend was more painful to Eric than any of his other moods. Sometimes Albert was kind, thoughtful, and almost tender in his friendship; at other times he was savage and spiteful trying by any means to make himself hateful.

All this Eric forgave, attributing it to Albert's concern over his sister; and Eric could no longer doubt that Albert loved his sister dearly, although he said mocking things against her and seized every opportunity, it seemed, to revile her.

Eric had at last become alarmed over his friend's state and decided to talk with Eileen about it, and that was why he had brought up the subject that night.

Now he felt that Albert would be delighted with the news of his sister's decision. Of course, nothing was certain yet; she still might change her mind; but Eric felt reasonably sure that this was no unreasoned impulse on Eileen's part, and that tomorrow he would find her, as she had said, at two o'clock in her apartment, that perhaps the change in her would be final and lasting, and perhaps -- his face flushed with happiness at the half-formed thought in his mind.

Stopping in front of the printing office window, he peered anxiously in. The front was dark, but the usual light was on in back. He tried the door and found it open. Entering, he called, but there was no answer. He walked hesitantly through the office to the back room, thinking that perhaps

Albert was asleep. The big press room and the smaller room in which type was set were both deserted, although a dim light was burning over the printing press.

Eric, determined by now to find his friend, decided to go to Albert's house, for he might have gone home for a bite to eat or for a few minutes' rest. He hurried back through town and at the Congregational church turned left down the west arm of the cross. He passed the railroad station, which seemed to be deserted, and reached Albert's house, only to find it completely dark.

Nevertheless, he knocked softly on the door, fearing to wake the occupants in the other side of the house. He turned the knob of the door, but it was locked. He knocked again three or four times, but there was no answer.

Disappointed, Eric walked slowly back toward town. He did not know where else to look for his friend, although it was barely possible that Albert had himself gone in search of Eric and was at that moment calling at Eric's house. Thinking of this possibility, Eric quickened his step.

He stopped when he reached the Congregational church, to get his breath and to look down the east arm of the cross, which he had just traversed almost an hour before. Eileen was not in sight. Turning toward home, he suddenly saw her walking in front of Burton Block; she was just on the point of turning into the door that would bring her to the stairs that led to her apartment. On a sudden impulse, Eric called to her, without thinking what he was doing. His voice echoed back to him from

the empty streets of Leton, but Eileen, without hearing, opened the big door of the Block and went in.

Eric, feeling silly for yielding to his impulse and calling to her when he was quite sure that she would not want to see him at that moment, walked briskly down the incline from the church, past the post-office, past the Block, and on through town. He stopped once again at the printing shop to see whether Albert had returned, and not finding him, hurried on toward home.

Albert was not there, but Eric's mother was sitting in the living room knitting. She looked at him reproachfully.

"You're late tonight," she said. He was usually home by ten or a little after, and now it was after eleven.

"Yes," he said, still somewhat excited, and disappointed at not finding Albert there, although it was unreasonable to expect him..

"Has anyone been to see me? Albert?"

"Albert Comfort? No one was here. How could he come -- he works at night."

"I know," he said lamely. "I thought he might have been up -- I wanted to see him."

He did not sit down, because his mother was looking at him with the worried expression he had seen so frequently on her face of late, as though she wanted to speak to him about something. He thought of confiding in his mother, or telling her about Eileen and about his fears for Albert, but he decided that would be impossible. She would not understand. She would

try to comfort him, saying that she understood, trying to relieve his anxiety and to respond to his mood of mingled joy and fear. But in reality she would be puzzled, sympathetic but not comprehending.

He went over to his mother and kissed her goodnight. "I think I'll go to bed," he said.

"Eric," she said as he turned away, but when he looked at her she resumed her knitting, swiftly and nervously. He saw that she wanted to speak but could not bring herself to it. She would not look at him, but watched the point of her knitting needles as they shuttled in and out, back and forth.

He felt suddenly ashamed, realizing the pain and worry he had been causing his mother. But her worry was groundless; he would have to reassure her. He wanted to go over to her, close to her, kneel at her feet and tell her that she need not fear for him, that there was nothing to worry about... now... He wanted to make her feel the joy and confidence that he felt, the warm happiness that filled the corners of his heart.

But for some reason which he could not himself fathom he stood rooted to the spot. Perhaps there was a feeling of doubt about the legitimacy of his joy, perhaps there was a feeling of uncertainty in his heart, a premonition that all was not as well as he thought. At any rate he felt that to pour out his reassurances so wholeheartedly and unreservedly to his mother would be deceitful -- for to come right down to it, he was not sure.

"Don't worry, Mother," he said. "Tomorrow all will be well."

And then feeling that this was not enough, he added, "You'll see. Tomorrow morning I'm going to start work on my farm, on my farm -- all will be well."

Again he went to her and kissed her. She looked at him gratefully, and the hands that held the knitting trembled. She did not trust herself to speak..

"Don't worry," he whispered, and straightening up, he hurried from the room.

"Goodnight, dear," he heard his mother call as he ascended the stairs.

"Goodnight, Mother."

Eric kept his promise to his mother, and spent the whole morning cleaning out the barn. He had no particular reason for making the barn his starting place, but he could think of nothing better to do. Dressed in old clothes, he threw himself into his work with enthusiasm and pleasure.

Although he started the work merely as a gesture partly to please his mother and partly to ease his own conscience, which demanded that he make a start, he found that the actual physical exercise was invigorating; his muscles responded restfully, and in spite of the energy he expended in removing old pieces of lumber, heaps of rubbish, and in sweeping and cleaning the floors and walls of the barn, still he did not seem to get tired. He felt just as fresh and energetic when his mother called him to lunch : at twelve-thirty as he had when he started.

She came out to the barn to call him, and he smiled at her enthusiasm when she saw how much he had accomplished. The barn, in fact, did look much cleaner and neater, and the rubbish piled high outside looked like a tremendous amount of labor; but he knew that he actually had accomplished nothing. His first real step toward farming would come when he hired a man to plough the land. This he had decided to do on the following Monday. In the meantime the cleaning out of the barn had served as a palliative for his own newly found energy, and had given his mother a new faith in him, easing her worries.

"Tomorrow I'll have a bonfire," he said as they walked back to the house.

"You look like a farmer already," his mother said, looking askance at his dirty clothes. "You haven't time for a bath before lunch, but you can't come to the table with those dirty clothes -- and Natalie would have a fit. Why don't you put on a bathrobe. I'm so glad that you've really started; Tim thinks that you'll make a fine farmer. Have you seen him? No? Well, he wanted to see you, but I guess it's not necessary now."

After lunch, Eric took a bath in spite of his mother's warning that he would get a cramp if he did it so soon after eating. She had accepted without question or remark the fact that he was going out for the afternoon. He was tempted, during lunch, to tell his mother where he was going and why, but he refrained, not wishing to spoil the even tenor of the communion which existed between him and his mother at that time.

It was quarter of two when he finally finished dressing

after his bath and was ready to start for Eileen's. He had hoped to start early enough to run down to Albert's house for a moment -- by this time he would be awake and probably up -- but now there wasn't time.

When he got downstairs, he found that his mother had gone out to the flower garden, and he went into the kitchen to call goodbye to her from the back door. Natalie was there, working in her usual methodical way, with the same expressionless face that he had always known and the same blank, unrevealing look in her eyes, as though she had drawn an opaque film across them to shut out the light from without and to close off any revelation that might come from within. Her face had lost the look of illness, had seemed to grow a little more relaxed, as though she had been relieved of the strain she was under a month before. Looking at her now, Eric felt that she was at peace with herself, that she was, as much as she could ever be, happy. She did not speak.

"Goodbye, Mother," he called through the door of the kitchen.

"Goodbye," she said. "Do you want the car?"

"No. Maybe I'll be back for it later."

He paused for a moment, wanting to say something to Natalie, but her back was toward him and she did not turn around. He left, wondering what was the mystery that lay behind her strange personality, feeling sorry for her, and yet envying her the peace of mind which she seemed to enjoy in spite of the tragic conditions of her life, the misunderstanding or

whatever it was that kept her from enjoying the love that was rightfully due her from her children.

Not wanting to be late, he hurried as fast as he could down the road to Keton. His legs and lungs began to feel the strain, and he was sorry that he had not taken the car. The muscles in his thighs grew very tired, and he was afraid that the left one was going to knot into a cramp. He could have relieved the strain breaking into a run, but he was afraid that people would notice him and that he would look peculiar running dressed as he was in a topcoat and hat and in his best suit.

When he reached Burton Block, he was tired and out of breath, and his legs would hardly carry him up the flight of stairs that led to Eileen's room. He stopped on the landing at the top of the stairs to get his breath before seeing Eileen, stood there for a minute leaning on the railing and taking deep breaths. The air was musty in the hall, smelling of dust and old wood, and being poorly lighted, it was semi-dark.

In spite of his short rest he was still breathing rapidly when he knocked on the door of Eileen's room. So confident had he been of a response to his knock that his mind completed the pattern of the action and produced the sound of footsteps approaching the door -- first his knock and then the quick footsteps -- and he even took off his hat expectantly.

But then he realized that part of the pattern was illusory, that there had been no footsteps, no answer to his knock. And he knocked again..

No sooner did the sound of his last tap on the door die in

his ears than he knew with a sudden sick despair that there would be no answer. He stood there with his head bent forward so that his hair brushed against the door, his hands hanging limply at his side, his hat dangling in the two-fingered grip of his left hand. He should have known that this was the way it would be; in his heart he had known. But no, that was not true. He had expected something far different; he had believed her when she said last night that she would be there. He had believed her with all his heart. And not solely because he wanted to believe her but because he had faith in her. She must be there, she had to be; by all that was good and fair in women and good and fair in her, she had to be there.

He knocked again, louder. And then again and again. Thundering against the door. Desperately he tried the knob, and the door opened.

For a moment he stood in the doorway, unable to see; the shades were down, and the room was even darker than the hall. But as the air from the room struck his nostrils, he suddenly turned giddy, and a premonition of what he would actually find swept over him. Summoning all his strength, he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. At the same moment he saw her, lying on the couch at the other end of the room, to his left.

Eileen was lying on her back, her clothes carefully arranged, in a perfectly natural position except for her head, which was twisted at a grotesque angle, so that she seemed to be looking back over her shoulder at the window behind the bed.

She was wearing the same dress that she had on the night before, and her arms were folded demurely across her breast so that her white hands lay one on each of her shoulders.

Eric went closer to her and saw the half-smile on her lips, which gave her a peculiarly mocking, sneering expression that reminded Eric immediately of her brother. Her hair was in order except for one lock which drooped over one eyebrow and lay carelessly against her cheek. He could see no signs of pain in her face.

Eric stood there for a long time, holding his hat in his hand and looking at Eileen's body. Her shoes had been taken off and placed neatly side by side at the foot of the bed, and her stocking feet pointed straight up. In one silk stocking there was a slight tear where she had caught it in a bramble, and a tiny spot of blood showed through.

As he stood there, a picture passed through Eric's mind of what had happened, and the scene that he imagined was almost exactly true to the actual reality. He could see the abrasions that Albert's hands had made on her white throat. She must have died instantly and painlessly, Albert's muscular hands snapping her neck like a toothpick. Then he had arranged her body on the couch and gone away. Eric knew what had happened just as surely as though he had been there and seen it.

Although it was fairly warm out and he had almost run all the way from his house to here, Eric had not felt hot when he entered the room. Now, however, he suddenly became aware that his whole body was bathed in sweat. His face and the backs of

his hands glistened with it, and he could feel it running down the hollow in the middle of his chest. The room felt insufferably hot and humid, as though heavy storm clouds were gathering from all sides for a summer storm. His chest hurt him every time he drew in his breath.

Suddenly he started. Downstairs a door had slammed, and he heard footsteps on the stairs. He walked quickly to the door of the room and noiselessly turned the key in the lock.. Then he stood with his ear to the door, listening to the footsteps. They turned at the top of the stairs and went in the opposite direction. Eric listened until they died away and another door slammed.

Taking off his coat, he threw it across the back of a chair, placing his hat on top of it. He walked back to the body of Eileen and stood close to her, looking down at her face. The lipstick had begun to flake on her lips and the purple color of her lips under it showed through. Eric put his hand down timidly and touched her on the forehead; it was cold as a wet stone. He pulled his hand back quickly, for one of her eyelids had opened because of the pressure of his hand, and through the narrow slit the white of her eyeball gleamed.

He drew a chair over and sat down weakly beside the couch. Although the atmosphere of the room was almost unbearable, it never occurred to him to open a window. He loosened his tie and opened his collar, wiping the sweat from his neck with his handkerchief.

For a long time Eric sat there beside the body, and his thoughts were fairly lucid. He reflected on how strange it was that he had not felt at all surprised; it was as though what he saw was what he expected to see. He had the feeling that all this had happened before in his experience, that from the moment he got up this morning until the moment he looked on Eileen's body had all been rehearsed, that his knocking on the door had been a pretense, a part of the act, when in reality he knew that no one would answer, that he would have to open the door himself and find himself looking at the dead body of Eileen.

And even more than this, he felt that every moment he had known Eileen had all been leading forward toward this one predestined end; and from the very first moment he, Eric, knew that the last would be as it was -- this. This conviction, arising hardly at first as a vague impression and then growing more and more clear and real, puzzled him and troubled him. He thought that he should feel more horrified at the sight of the body, that he should stand agast and stricken; but instead he accepted Eileen's death as a brute fact, an expected link in the chain of events that had started when he met her in the Rutland station two months before.

He was troubled by the feeling that he had foreseen all this from the start, and he brooded long as he sat motionless in the chair, never taking his eyes from her face and the half-opened eye. He was troubled because he felt that during these two months, while he was living an apparently normal existence,

his mind had betrayed him, had shown a duplicity that only now he was fully aware of. Every waking moment of those months had been a lie. It was as though he had been playing a part, repeating lines, that were not actually in the play, while beside him on the same stage the real show went on, leading inevitably to this dreadful climax.

And instead of parading up and down the stage like a puppet he should have stopped the play, knowing what it was leading to, should have said, "No, this can't go on. Stop here, before it is too late. See, see, this is what lies ahead." But he had chosen to be silent, or rather his mind, false to him and foul, had chosen, and he had followed.

How could he, last night, sit there on the little hill and talk so calmly with her, knowing all the while that the end was in sight? But last night, and for the first time, his true self had tried to speak, had tried in a roundabout way to warn her against her brother: she had refused to listen, but he should have urged her, he should have forced her to listen.

And, who knows, perhaps all the time she, too, suspected what the end would be. He recalled certain things she had said, long ago, words that showed she feared her brother and perhaps foresaw this very thing.

All this and much more passed through his mind as he sat there while the hours passed.

Toward evening, when the room had become still darker, his mind was still functioning almost normally. He sat there in his chair, unmoving, waiting for the next event, for he knew

what would happen next. He had no watch, and the clock in the room had stopped; but he kept track of the time by tolling of the hour in the steeple of the Congregational church. When the clock struck six, he sat up expectantly, and for the first time he turned his eyes from Eileen's face and looked craftily at the door. He walked across the room and made sure that the door was locked, by turning the knob and pulling against it hard. Then he took the key out of the door and put it into his coat pocket. It clinked against something metallic in his pocket; putting his hand in, he pulled out the little pocket-book which he had found last night in the briar hedge. He stared at it a moment and then thrust it into the other pocket of his coat.

The minutes passed, and he grew restless, pacing quietly up and down the floor of the room, pausing every now and then to listen. The odor of death had grown more distinct in the room as the afternoon wore on, but Eric refused to recognize it, even though now as he walked it assailed his nostrils so distinctly that it was unmistakable. Somehow he felt that smell as the smell of decay was to deprive the body of Eileen of whatever beauty it possessed, was insulting to one who had so short a time ago been one of the most lovely creatures he had ever seen.

Out of this refusal to recognize the scent of death grew a strange hallucination. As the darkness approached and Eric paced the floor, he began to feel that the gathering dusk was bringing to the body lying on the couch certain signs of life,

as though the spirit of the night were entering her body and quickening it. But this feeling did not take on its full force in Eric's mind until later.

Suddenly he stopped in his tracks. Downstairs a door opened and slammed shut, and footsteps sounded on the stairs. Eric tiptoed toward the door and put his ear against it. These were the footsteps he had been expecting. This was what he had been waiting for. They came to the top of the stairs, stopped for a full minute, and then approached the door.

Eric turned sidewise so that anyone looking through the keyhole could not see him. He stood there holding his breath until a knock sounded on the door. Then very softly and slowly he let his breath out and continued to breathe very very quietly.

The knob of the door turned slowly, and Eric heard the door creak as someone pushed against it from the outside. There was a long wait, and the voice of Albert sounded from the outside.

"Who's in there," Albert called softly.

Again Eric held his breath, knowing that the other man would be listening with his ear against the door.

The question was repeated, a little more loudly this time, and again Eric froze into immobility. For two or three minutes there was perfect silence. Then the doorknob rattled as it was released, and Eric heard Albert's footsteps retreating down the hall and down the stairs. He was almost running. The downstairs door slammed. Eric put the key back in the lock and unlocked the door.

The slamming of the door was like the closing of the curtain on the last act. The play had run out, and now Eric did not know what was to come next. All was over. When he turned again toward Eileen, his mind was gone.

"There," he said, speaking to the dead girl in a strange high-pitched voice, as though he were talking softly and playfully to a kitten, "he's gone. Wasn't that easy? You don't have to be afraid. He's gone away. You see? Gone ---"

He went on talking, sitting beside the dead body which to his mind had taken on life. Gradually as the hours passed, his voice, which stopped only at rare intervals, assumed a sing-song, monotonous tone, still high-pitched and unnatural, and his sentences drifted into incoherence.

At around eleven o'clock someone walking through the hall heard him, listened, and then reported to the night-police-man. Eric was found, sitting beside the corpse of Eileen, babbling incoherently and dangling a little child's pocketbook in front of her face as though he were trying to amuse a baby.

XVIII

The impassive white face of the Congregational church gleamed in the bright sun of a June afternoon.

Mr. Will Ashley, the letter-carrier, stepped out of the postoffice with his heavy bag of mail strapped over his shoulder. Mr. Ashley, walking slowly and fingering a packet of letters which he carried in his hand, turned right and crossing the railroad bridge disappeared into Abramson's Dry Goods shop, the first store on the north end of town and his first port of call.

A little later the mail truck, carrying packages and special delivery letters, clattered out of the driveway beside the postoffice, and, turning to the left away from town chugged up the little hill in front of the church, where it turned right and made its way carefully and slowly down the eastern arm of Keton's cross. Had the pastor been standing in his doorway, he would have received a sober greeting from Tiger O'Toole, the driver of the truck, who had been a prizefighter in his youth some twenty years earlier, and who at forty-odd had but recently put away his youthful outlook on life. The minister would not have known it, even if he had been there, that just two months earlier Tiger had reached a turning point in his life. Something had happened to him that would dog him to the end of his life and which overnight had caused him to

show his years.

That April day two months ago was still vivid in Tiger's mind.

He had sped down the macadam road at a reckless pace, making the necessary stops to deliver his packages, and then speeding on. He prided himself on being able to do this street and the west arm of the cross in an hour, and pass Will Ashley at two o'clock on the town bridge.

The last house on the street was the Mattison's, and a little beyond that was the gravel driveway screened by a briar hedge, where he usually turned around. With nothing for the Mattisons's he sped by their little white house on his left, and not until he was within ten yards of the driveway did he put on his brakes. He swung the wheel and careened diagonally into the gravel of the inclined drive, the hind wheels skidding just enough to complete the turn.

He saw a flash of white, heard a little scream and a sickening thud. He felt as though the whole bony framework of his body had suddenly collapsed and left him a mass of jellied flesh..

That terrible moment could never be erased from the mind of Tiger O'Toole, although what followed was but a hazy memory, like the recollection of the dim rounds of a fight in which he had been knocked out.

He had picked up the little bundle of white that had once been Mary Mattison, had placed her in the seat beside him and driven to her house. But no one was at home.

Then he began to realize that no one had seen the accident, no one had heard the sound, even though he felt that the whole world stood aghast and shuddered when it happened. The little girl was dead, there was no help for it. If he took her to the doctor's, she would still be dead, and he would be found out, would lose his job, would be arrested, imprisoned for reckless driving.

He placed the body in the rear of the mail truck, covering it over with an empty mail bag. Then he drove down the west arm of the cross, past the station, past the Comfort's, and on, making the necessary stops, in trembling fear of discovery, to deliver his mail.

After the last stop, fearing to continue his route in the normal way by going back through town, he drove on toward the west looking for a good place to hide the body. But every place he saw seemed too conspicuous or in some other way not good enough for his purpose. He turned right on a dirt road and drove on. This road curved around until it crossed the north-south arm of the cross about a mile outside of Keton, and still he drove, too much afraid to get out of the truck.

He knew the road, and he knew that it curved around still more, but in a perspiring funk he drove on, feeling desperately that fate was leading him right back to the scene of the accident. His road finally met the east-west arm of the cross about two miles below the Mattison's house, and here he backed the truck in among some trees so that it was pretty effectually hidden from any possible passersby.

Tiger knew that this was the worst place he could have chosen; it was too near the little girl's home, and she would be found before nightfall -- she might be found at any minute now, for he felt that people were already searching. He carried her farther into the woods.

Then a desperate plan came to his mind for concealing the body. He would start a fire, set the woods on fire all around her body so that it would be consumed. But the leaves were somewhat damp; it would be hard to get the flame started, although once started it would feed eagerly and rapidly on the pine and hemlock trees that were so abundant there. He thought of using some of his mail, but immediately discarded the plan. Then it occurred to him to set fire to the child's clothes.

With thick fumbling hands he stripped off the white cotton dress and the rest of her clothes, trying to avoid looking at her as he did so, and put them in a pile beside her body, visualizing the tall leaping flame that would lick the low boughs of the hemlock tree under which he knelt. He kicked some leaves around the clothes to help spread the flame, reached into his pocket for a match, and cursed. He had left them in the mail truck with his cigarettes, resting on the flat shelf between the dashboard and the windshield.

To hell with it. He was already nearly an hour late on his route, and people would notice it. He fled back to the truck, leaped in, and drove back the way he had come, fearful of passing the Mattison house again lest somebody should

remember it after the body was found.

The next day, when he turned slowly into the driveway where the accident had happened, he saw a little yellow pocket-book dangling among the bushes of the briar hedge.

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